

THE CITIES OF REFUGE

BIBLE TEXT : Deuteronomy 19:1-21; Joshua 20:1-9

LESSON 139 Junior Course

MEMORY VERSE: "In the fear of the LORD s strong confidence: and his children shall have a place of refuge" (Proverbs 14:26).

BIBLE TEXT in King James Version

Deuteronomy 19:1-21

¹ When the LORD thy God hath cut off the nations, whose land the LORD thy God giveth thee, and thou succeedest them, and dwellest in their cities, and in their houses;

² Thou shalt separate three cities for thee in the midst of thy land, which the LORD thy God giveth thee to possess it.

³ Thou shalt prepare thee a way, and divide the coasts of thy land, which the LORD thy God giveth thee to inherit, into three parts, that every slayer may flee thither.

⁴ And this *is* the case of the slayer, which shall flee thither, that he may live: Whoso killeth his neighbour ignorantly, whom he hated not in time past;

⁵ As when a man goeth into the wood with his neighbour to hew wood, and his hand fetcheth a stroke with the axe to cut down the tree, and the head slippeth from the helve, and lighteth upon his neighbour, that he die; he shall flee unto one of those cities, and live:

⁶ Lest the avenger of the blood pursue the slayer, while his heart is hot, and overtake him, because the way is long, and slay him; whereas he *was* not worthy of death, inasmuch as he hated him not in time past.

⁷ Wherefore I command thee, saying, Thou shalt separate three cities for thee.

⁸ And if the LORD thy God enlarge thy coast, as he hath sworn unto thy fathers, and give thee all the land which he promised to give

BIBLE REFERENCES:

NOTES:

Eye for an Eye

Eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth, and "Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed," (Genesis 9:6), was the law to the Israelites. If a man committed murder, a near relative of the murdered man was duty bound to kill the offender. No amount of money could right the wrong; blood must be shed.

Accidental death caused by another person was not considered murder, and no revenge was to be made. If two men were working together in the woods, and one man's axhead flew off and killed the other man, no one would be held guilty for that, because it was an accident.

But what if the brother of the dead man became so angry with the manslayer that he would not consider whether it had been an accident or not? He might kill him without giving him a chance to explain. He might even have had a grievance against the man whose flying axhead had taken a life, and would think that now was his chance to pay his grudge.

Refuge

God has made a provision for every circumstance. He realized that innocent men might sometimes suffer because of the law, "Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed," so He provided a place of safety. The altar at the Tabernacle was a temporary refuge; and after the Children of Israel arrived in Canaan, six cities were to be designated as a haven for the man who had innocently shed blood.

The Levites did not receive an inheritance of land in Canaan by which to earn their living, but were given forty-eight cities in which to live. Their support would come from the people's tithes. All their time was spent in ministering to the Israelites. The education of God's people centered in their religion, and it was the duty of the Levites to be the teachers.

Six of the forty-eight cities, three on the east side of Jordan and three on the west side, were the cities of refuge. The three in Canaan are often spoken of during the ministry of Christ. In the north, in what later became Galilee, was the city of Kedesh; in the south, Judah, was Hebron; and halfway between, in the possession of Ephraim, was Shechem. These cities were situated in such places that no one need travel more than about thirty miles from his home when running for safety.

A Cleared Highway

The highways leading to the cities of refuge were to be straight and kept clear. The man who was running for his life would not have time to be tied up in a traffic jam or to go on detours. Plain signs with the word Milat (meaning refuge) were to be placed at every crossroad, pointing to the city. Everything was to make it easy for the innocent slayer to be saved.

After he arrived within the city he was among friends. The

unto thy fathers;

⁹ If thou shalt keep all these commandments to do them, which I command thee this day, to love the LORD thy God, and to walk ever in his ways; then shalt thou add three cities more for thee, beside these three:

¹⁰ That innocent blood be not shed in thy land, which the LORD thy God giveth thee *for* an inheritance, and *so* blood be upon thee.

¹¹ But if any man hate his neighbour, and lie in wait for him, and rise up against him, and smite him mortally that he die, and fleeth into one of these cities:

¹² Then the elders of his city shall send and fetch him thence, and deliver him into the hand of the avenger of blood, that he may die.

¹³ Thine eye shall not pity him, but thou shalt put away *the guilt of* innocent blood from Israel, that it may go well with thee.

¹⁴ Thou shalt not remove thy neighbour's landmark, which they of old time have set in thine inheritance, which thou shalt inherit in the land that the LORD thy God giveth thee to possess it.

¹⁵ One witness shall not rise up against a man for any iniquity, or for any sin, in any sin that he sinneth: at the mouth of two witnesses, or at the mouth of three witnesses, shall the matter be established.

¹⁶ If a false witness rise up against any man to testify against him *that which is wrong*;

¹⁷ Then both the men, between whom the controversy *is*, shall stand before the LORD, before the priests and the judges, which shall be in those days;

¹⁸ And the judges shall make diligent inquisition: and, behold, *if* the witness *be* a false witness, *and* hath testified falsely against his brother;

Levites served God and were the best of the people, and they would do what they could to help those who sought refuge among them. If the manslayer lost his life it would be his own fault, because everything was provided for his advantage.

However, he must stay in the city in order to be safe. If his pursuer should ever find him outside the walls, he would still have the right to kill him. Not until the death of the high priest was he free to go home in safety. It seems that the death of the high priest fulfilled the shedding of blood for the man who was killed.

Wilful Murder

Sometimes people who had wilfully committed murder would try to hide in the city of refuge. Or perhaps the innocence of a rightful resident might be questioned. In that case the man must be brought to trial. In the gate of the city sat the judge who decided for the congregation. At least two witnesses must come against the defendant, swearing to his guilt. Each witness must be questioned separately, so they could not hear what the other one said; and if the judge decided the man was guilty of murder, he was given to the avenger to be killed. But if the verdict was Not Guilty, he was free to remain in the city of refuge.

Rightful Judgment

Other cases might come before the judges, wherein there was a disagreement between two people. Each person who came to the judge with a complaint must bring at least two, perhaps three, witnesses. We remember that when the Jews were accusing Jesus they had to bring the two witnesses, and they finally secured two who swore falsely against Him and they did not agree (**Mark 14:59** ⁹ *But neither so did their witness agree together*). God wanted His people to judge righteous judgment, and the witnesses were supposed to speak the truth about the defendant. If the defendant was found innocent, the judgment the accuser had wanted to bring upon the accused was returned to himself. For this reason people would be quite sure their accused was guilty before bringing him to a judge for judgment which might come upon their own head.

Jesus Our Refuge

We can see in this city of refuge a picture of Christ. We have all sinned. We could not help it, because the nature of sin was born in us. Judgment is following us; and unless we run to Jesus, our Refuge, and hide in Him, we shall be doomed to everlasting punishment.

There is no need for anyone to be lost. The highway to Jesus is well marked. We have the Bible, which tells us to repent and forsake our sins that we might be saved. It is simple enough for anyone to understand. "Wayfaring men, though fools, shall not err therein" (Isaiah 35:8).

If we had seen one of those innocent manslayers refusing to run to the city of refuge, and uselessly losing his life, we would have considered him foolish indeed. But what about all the people who refuse to come to Jesus in repentance? They are outside the "city of refuge" and may be cut off at any moment to suffer eternal punishment. Everyone is welcome to come to Jesus. He said, "Him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out" (John 6:37). If the sinner will run to Jesus, he will find rest and be safe from the destroyer. Why does he not run?

¹⁹ Then shall ye do unto him, as he had thought to have done unto his brother: so shalt thou put the evil away from among you.

²⁰ And those which remain shall hear, and fear, and shall henceforth commit no more any such evil among you.

²¹ And thine eye shall not pity; *but* life *shall go* for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.

Joshua 20:1-9

¹ The LORD also spake unto Joshua, saying,

² Speak to the children of Israel, saying, Appoint out for you cities of refuge, whereof I spake unto you by the hand of Moses:

³ That the slayer that killeth *any* person unawares *and* unwittingly may flee thither: and they shall be your refuge from the avenger of blood.

⁴ And when he that doth flee unto one of those cities shall stand at the entering of the gate of the city, and shall declare his cause in the ears of the elders of that city, they shall take him into the city unto them, and give him a place, that he may dwell among them.

⁵ And if the avenger of blood pursue after him, then they shall not deliver the slayer up into his hand; because he smote his neighbour unwittingly, and hated him not beforetime.

⁶ And he shall dwell in that city, until he stand before the congregation for judgment, *and* until the death of the high priest that shall be in those days: then shall the slayer return, and come unto his own city, and unto his own house, unto the city from whence he fled.

⁷ And they appointed Kedesh in Galilee in mount Naphtali, and Shechem in mount Ephraim, and

Remaining in Jesus

The law said the manslayer must remain in the city of refuge. We must continue in Christ, keep our lives free from sin through the Blood of Jesus, if we want to remain safe. Jesus will never thrust out one who has fled to Him for refuge, but that person has power to walk out again if he chooses.

A man has been forgiven of his sins, and he is happy within the "walls" of Christ's refuge. But perhaps he forgets to pray, and he becomes too busy to read the Bible. Soon he becomes curious about what is going on outside the "city," and he goes to the gate just to look out. There he sees the vast "countryside" stretching out before him, and he begins to feel cramped in the "city." It is crowded, and he feels his rights are restricted by his being forced to remain there. So one day he walks out into the "free" countryside. He heaves a sigh of relief. There is no one to tell him what to do, and he rushes forth with exuberance, feeling that he is no longer bound by any Christian code.

But is he really free? He is on enemy territory. We would like to tell him to turn back quickly before he is captured by the enemy. Run back to the shelter of the city walls before it is too late! For your soul's sake, run quickly!

But the man refuses to go back. Now we see someone coming to meet him. It is Satan himself, and he has the right to destroy anyone he finds outside the city of refuge. In the end the escaped man will be committed to endless punishment.

Throughout eternity he will think of the peace that was in the city of refuge; the love he felt among the people who lived there. And he will think about the heavenly Jerusalem where all the people have gone who remained in that city of refuge. They are enjoying eternal bliss while he is tormented. Oh, if he had only stayed in the city! Or if he had returned while the gate was still open for him, when everyone was calling, "Come back, come back." Now it is too late; and he will be outside forever.

May all who read these words flee to the city of refuge; and when safe within its walls, do not even peek to see what is going on outside. May we always pray that the Lord will keep us safe under the Blood so we may inherit eternal life.

QUESTIONS

- 1 What was a city of refuge?
- 2 Why did God provide a city of refuge?
- 3 What is our refuge?
- 4 What happens to those who leave the city of refuge — in the natural in Israel's time, and in the spiritual in our time?
- 5 Explain how those who have left the city of refuge may still be saved.
- 6 What will happen to those who refuse to go back?

Kirjatharba, which *is* Hebron, in the mountain of Judah.

⁸ And on the other side Jordan by Jericho eastward, they assigned Bezer in the wilderness upon the plain out of the tribe of Reuben, and Ramoth in Gilead out of the tribe of Gad, and Golan in Bashan out of the tribe of Manasseh.

⁹ These were the cities appointed for all the children of Israel, and for the stranger that sojourneth among them, that whosoever killeth *any* person at unawares might flee thither, and not die by the hand of the avenger of blood, until he stood before the congregation.