

“AND THE LORD GAVE THEM REST”:
A CHRISTIAN READING OF THE BOOK OF JOSHUA

REFUGE FOR SINNERS
(JOSHUA 20:1-9)

I. Introduction

II. The Lord’s Institution of Cities of Refuge (Joshua 20:1-3)

- A. The introduction to this statute on cities of refuge begins in 20:1-3: “Then the LORD said to Joshua, ‘Say to the people of Israel, ‘Appoint the cities of refuge, of which I spoke to you through Moses, 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.’”
- B. It was the Lord God who instituted the cities of refuge.
- C. The purpose for which the cities of refuge are ordained is “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.”
 - 1. The avenger of blood may be a family member who feels obliged to seek revenge for his injured/deceased relative.
 - 2. In tribal societies that did not have our modern systems of public prosecution and legislation, the responsibility for pursuing justice and vengeance would be shared by family members (Butler, *Joshua*, 216).
 - 3. If one family member is killed, other members are required to avenge the deceased person. This is known as blood revenge (see also 2 Sam 14:1-11).
 - 4. Thus, the cities of refuge are to protect manslaughterers from the blood avengers.
 - 5. If left unregulated, blood revenge could end up in blood feuds and clan wars. —A perfect case in point is the blood revenge conducted by Simeon and Levi in Genesis 34.

***Questions for reflection:** (1) Who instituted the rule concerning cities of refuge? Why is this significant? (2) What is the avenger of blood? (3) What dangers could unregulated blood revenge pose to society? How does the case of Simeon and Levi demonstrate the dangers of unregulated blood revenge?

III. Some Instructions on the Cities of Refuge from the Torah

- A. The idea for the cities of refuge begins very early on in the Torah, the books of Moses. Consider the following texts:
 - 1. Exodus 21:12-14: The Lord says, “Whoever strikes a man so that he dies shall be put to death. 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. But if a man

willfully attacks another to kill him by cunning, you shall take him from my altar, that he may die.”

2. Numbers 35:9-34.

a. Only consider verses 9-11: “And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ‘Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When you cross the Jordan into the land of Canaan, then you shall select cities to be cities of refuge for you, that the manslayer who kills any person without intent may flee there.’”

B. Thus, when Israel sets aside the cities of refuge, it was not first and foremost for any liberal, humanistic distaste for capital punishment.

—Rather, it was out of obedience to the Lord God himself. God himself was the One who initiated the law. And God did so out of both his justice and mercy, as we shall see.

C. As we ponder this institution, we also see something about the character of our God.

1. For God, justice and mercy are tightly bound together.

2. Even in his laws, God makes room for mercy and compassion. God provides protection of the poor, innocent, and the oppressed.

3. Sometimes, the oppressed may be people who have done something wrong—but stand in danger of unjust punishments from others.

4. Such people (including manslaughterers) are also in need of protection.

5. God provides protection for them in the form of these cities of refuge.

a. On one hand, the cities are *mercy* to the sinner: They protect him or her from the possibly sinful anger of others.

b. On the other hand, the cities are *justice* for the sinner: They protect the sinner from unjust punishments and acts of vengeance.

***Questions for reflection:** (1) What does Exodus 21:12-14 say about capital punishment and cities of refuge? (2) What does Numbers 35:9-34 say about capital punishment and cities of refuge? (3) Who was the One who instituted the cities of refuge? (4) How do the cities represent justice and mercy to the sinner?

IV. Justice and Mercy—Even for Sinners

A. We can already discern a lesson for us here in our modern day contexts: Even bad people need mercy and justice shown and done to them.

B. One of the ways that sin works in our lives is to make us...

1. think only the worst of others

2. think only the best of ourselves

a. We like to think that we see everything clearly and can therefore prosecute justice with perfection.

C. We carry this attitude with us wherever we go: families, schools, churches, and the larger society. Somehow, we sinners, love the taste of proverbial blood.

—Which explains why scandals sell newspapers so well.

D. Yet, we must always remember Psalm 130:3:

If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities,

O Lord, who could stand?

1. God is not only angered and grieved with those sins that are considered crimes by the state. He is also grieved with the sins of the mind and heart that we commit every day.
2. If God were to come in full judgment, with no provision of refuge for the sinner, none can withstand the heat of his anger.
3. Given our evilness, it is truly wonderful that God makes provision for sinners.
 - a. God takes into consideration the (providential) complexities of life.
 - b. Even in justice, God remains understanding and merciful.
4. Prof. Trent Butler: “The innocent man should not suffer unduly and the guilty man should be given sufficient protection and hope for new opportunities as well as sufficient punishment” (*Joshua*, 218).

***Question for reflection:** What ethical principle does the institution concerning cities of refuge bequeath to us today?

V. Applying to a City of Refuge (*Joshua 20:4-5*)

- A. Verse 4 gives us the actual procedure for how the manslayer applies to a city of refuge.
- B. First: “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.”
- C. Second: “Then they shall take him into the city and give him a place, and he shall remain with them.”
- D. Verse 5 states that the elders of the city are obligated to protect this man that has come to them for refuge. They are not to betray him to the avenger of blood.

***Question for reflection:** (1) How does one apply to the city of refuge? What is the process? Why is this process necessary? (2) According to verse 5, what obligation do the elders of the city have toward the one who has been admitted to them?

VI. The Manslayer’s Duration of Stay (*Joshua 20:6*)

- A. Verse 6 gives us two conditions upon which a manslayer may leave the city of refuge.
 1. First: “And he shall remain in that city *until* he has stood before the congregation for judgment...”
 2. Second: “*until* the death of him who is high priest at the time.”
- B. Once those two conditions are met, the Scripture says, “Then the manslayer may return to his own town and his own home, to the town from which he fled.”
- C. What do those two conditions mean?
 1. The first one is fairly obvious: The manslayer must not be released until his case has been heard by the congregation of Israel (presumably, as represented by the elders of the city).
 - a. The cities of refuge are meant to protect the manslayer while he is awaiting the due process of law.
 - b. Again, we find this emphasis on justice for the sinner. God wants the punishments to fit the crime.

- c. It may be that the suspected manslayer was really innocent. In that case, the due process of law would be meant to defend his innocence.
- 2. The second condition is a little more difficult. Why should the death of the high priest be reason for the release of the man?
 - a. The answer, according to scholars (Howard, 386; Hubbard, 453), is that the death of the high priest may have been taken as atonement for the sins of the murderer.
 - b. Since the high priest represents the entire nation before God, his death is taken as a sacrifice for sin (much like the sacrificial offerings).
- D. Question: “But doesn’t 1 Timothy 2:5 say that there is only one mediator between God and man, who has given his life as a ransom for all?”
 - 1. Yes: But when Paul talks about the one mediator, he is talking about the one mediator whose sacrifice is truly able to remove sin.
 - The one mediator who truly and finally makes complete atonement for all sins is Jesus Christ, and no one else.
 - 2. But long before the Messiah comes, God writes glimpses of Christ into the Old Testament.
 - a. This is what Paul means in Romans 3:21 when he says that the righteousness of God in Jesus Christ is witnessed to by the Law and the Prophets.
 - b. Every major institution that God gave to ancient Israel—the cities of refuge; the temple; the priesthood; the prophetic leadership—were meant to illustrate what the Messiah would be and do for his people.
 - c. To say that the death of the high priest makes atonement for the sins of Israel does not go against the sole and sufficient mediatorship of the Lord Jesus Christ.
 - We are simply talking about a *ceremonial* atonement. Yet, this ceremonial atonement in the Old Testament does point to the *actual* atonement that the Lord Jesus would accomplish by his death.
- E. By using the death of the high priest as a reason for the freedom of the manslayer, God is teaching his people about the reality of substitutionary atonement: Something or even someone can pay for the sins of another.
 - 1. The building blocks needed for a proper understanding of the Messiah are being set in place, one institution at a time, in the cultural consciousness of Israel.
 - 2. Why are these institutions no longer relevant after Jesus?
 - In Jesus, all the functions of those institutions have been fulfilled. Jesus is the ultimate City of Refuge. Jesus is the final Prophet King. Jesus is the great High Priest. Jesus is the ultimate Temple of the living God.

***Question for reflection:** (1) What are the two conditions upon which a manslayer may be released from the city? (2) Why does the high priest’s death allow the manslayer to go free? (3) How does Jesus fulfil the Old Testament institutions?

VII. A List of the Cities of Refuge (Joshua 20:7-9)

- A. Verses 7-9 give us a list of the cities of refuge.
 - 1. *Kedesh* (Galilee)

2. *Shechem* (Ephraim)
 3. *Kiriath-arba* or *Hebron* (Judah)
 4. *Bezer* (Reuben)
 5. *Ramoth* (Gad)
 6. *Golan* (Manasseh)
- B. Verse 9 gives us a summarizing statement: “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.”

***Question for reflection:** Where are the cities of refuge located?

VIII. A World of Justice and Mercy

- A. It pleases God that both *justice* and *mercy* are shown to sinners.
1. *Justice*—because the person, even though he may be guilty, needs to be punished fairly and not excessively.
 2. *Mercy*—because the sinner, even though ultimately undeserving, is protected from the sinful anger of others. Justice and mercy are very closely intertwined in the cities of refuge.
- B. Even though we do not have cities of refuge today, the underlying principles are applicable in a number of ways.
- C. Relevance to our public legal system
1. God wants our legal system to ensure both mercy and justice to the criminal.
 2. A just and merciful legal system is one that...
 - a. ensures that the criminal is not punished *beyond* what his crime merits.
 - b. protects the criminal from the sinful hatred of others, whom he may have injured.
 3. A healthy, justice system recognizes that all human beings are sinners—not just the guy who happened to break the one law. Thus, the sinner must also be protected from other sinners.
 4. In the cities of refuge, God is forming our sense of public justice. —Just because a person has offended you; even going so far as to commit a crime against you, does not mean that you can wage all out war against him.
- D. Relevance to our personal lives
1. The institution for the cities of refuge reminds us to show mercy to those who have hurt us.
 2. Showing mercy does not necessarily mean allowing people to escape the consequences of their sins. —Some sins are so destructive that there has to be punishment because we must not allow evil people to think they can triumph.
 3. But we also have to be careful in our demands for justice, because we too are sinners whose sense of justice is not always clear.
 4. Moreover, we have to remember that God still shows us mercy even today.
 - a. God gives us time to repent of our sins and find forgiveness in Christ.

- b. As much as possible, we need to make room for mercy even in our pursuit of justice. We need to allow the person who has sinned against us to repent and make things right.
- c. In fact, we need to desire that the person who has hurt us also find forgiveness in Christ. This is what our Lord teaches us in Matthew 5:43-48:

⁴³ “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ ⁴⁴ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. ⁴⁶ For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? ⁴⁸ You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

- i. The final sentence is a clear restatement of the introduction to the holiness code in Leviticus 19: “You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.”
- ii. How does Jesus define perfection or holiness in this case? It is by loving our enemies and doing good to them.

E. Relevance to churches

1. The institution for the cities of refuge is a call to churches to be cities of refuge in this world. We strive to be safe places for one another where we can be protected from the ugliness of this world.
2. The Church, and the many holy families that comprise her, must be a different society than the world.
3. What does it mean for a church to be relevant to our society today? The relevance that God requires from us is that we give to one another what the world cannot give—the tangible manifestations of the love and mercy of God in Jesus Christ.
 - a. Some concrete examples:
 - If ever we sin against one another, we seek to forgive and restore; not bear resentment (cf. Lev 19:17, 18; Mt 5:23, 24; Eph 4:32).
 - If ever we disagree with one another, we continue to respect one another’s differences of opinion (unless, of course, those differences are sinful or heretical).
 - We also respect one another’s unique weaknesses and struggles.
 - b. In the end, people ought to come to our church and say, “Yes, I feel welcome here. I feel understood. I feel respected. I feel that people encourage me to be holy, but continue to respect and love me when I fail. I love this church not simply because I took vows to do so. I love this church because this really is my Father’s house—and I am glad to be here.”

***Question for reflection:** (1) What is God pleased to show sinners? (2) How are the cities of refuge relevant to the formation of a legal system? (3) How are the cities of refuge relevant to our personal lives? (3) How can churches be cities of refuge for members?

IX. Graciousness Begets Graciousness

- A. God forms us into his gracious City of Refuge by having us look to the grace given to us: “In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (1 Jn 4:10)
- B. Graciousness begets graciousness: “And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work” (2 Cor 9:8).
—“Every good work” includes the work of becoming the city of refuge to others.
- C. Luke 7:47 is also applicable here: “Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little.”
- D. Thus we are reminded: Only the regenerated can show life. Only the sanctified can be holy. Only the forgiven can be merciful.

We can only do what God calls us to do if we have Christ and a clear understanding of what he has done for us. Just as God called Israel to build cities of refuge, God calls churches today to be cities of refuge for our times. The church is the only institution that *can* fulfil this function, that *can* succeed where our larger society fails, because God has already shown us his justice and mercy in Jesus Christ our Lord. In the death of his Son, God has punished our sins once and for all—sins even worse than manslaughter. And through this death, the mercy of God comes shining through. Since God has been so merciful to us, what power is there in the universe that can stop us from being merciful to others?

***Questions for reflection:** (1) What is needed in order for us to become the gracious people God wants us to be? (2) Why is the Church the only society that can truly be the great City of Refuge? (3) “Since God has been so merciful to us; what power is there in the universe that can stop us from being merciful to others?” Discuss. What prevents you from being merciful to others?