

**Title:** Cities of Refuge (Part One)  
**Text:** Numbers 35:10-12  
**Date:** 6 October, 2013  
**Preacher:** Rev Stu Cameron

The concept of sanctuary – a place of refuge and safety – has deep Christian roots. English law in the Middle Ages provided a way for "sinners" to find refuge. When a criminal or debtor wanted to flee to safety, he would travel to the famous Durham Cathedral and plead for asylum. The runaway banged on the cathedral's north door, using the enormous bronze sanctuary knocker, and wait for someone to usher him in. The cathedral bells would then be rung to notify Durham's citizens that a fugitive sought sanctuary.

Once inside, the criminal confessed his crime to a priest, surrendered his weapons, paid a nominal fee and donned a black gown. He lived in a railed-off alcove above the southwest tower, and within thirty-seven days decided whether to stand trial or leave the country. If a criminal chose to leave, he had nine days to exit England's borders, travelling solely on the king's highways. He would make the journey clothed in a white robe and carrying a wooden cross.

For centuries, this sanctuary principle remained the same: if you've committed a horrible crime, run to the church for protection. During this anxious journey, stone crosses stood as signposts along the highways, leading sinners to their refuge

Sinners could make their great escape through the church.

But even deeper than this, the concept of sanctuary – a place of refuge and safety – has profound biblical roots, tracing deep into the Old Testament. During the time of the Exodus, when Israel wandered for forty years in the wilderness, they would set camp each night around the Tabernacle of God, right in the heart of which was the brazen altar where sacrifices would be made.

The altar had four horns on it where the blood of sacrificed animals was sprinkled before being burnt. If a person was being pursued for a crime, they could seek safety by running to the altar and laying hold of one of its four hands. Then they could receive a fair hearing.

From the days of Israel's wandering in the wilderness, between slavery in Egypt and the freedom of the Promised Land, the altar of God was understood to be a place of safety and sanctuary; a refuge. This most holy place was like a neutral zone where people fleeing retribution, real or otherwise, could expect safety.

During the Exodus, tens of thousands of Israelites traveled in one large group, camping each night around the altar. Everyone was always close to the place of refuge and sanctuary. But after forty years of wandering the wilderness as a travelling city, Israel was ready to enter the Promised Land. The people would spread to their tribal lands, to new cities in a nation hundreds of square kilometers big. The altar, the place of sanctuary, will be too far for many people fleeing retributive justice to find refuge in time.

Reflecting this new reality, God provides a new way for people to find sanctuary. In Numbers God instructs Moses this way:

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. The cities shall be for you a refuge from the avenger, that the manslayer may not die until he stands before the congregation for judgment.  
(Numbers 35:10-12)

And so before entering the Promised Land, Moses allocated three Cities of Refuge in the eastern side of the Jordan River and later Joshua allocated three more on the western side. As you can see, they were evenly spaced, east from west, north from south.

There was Golan, Ramoth and Bezer on the east; Kedesh, Schechem and Hebron on the west.

Cities of Refuge weren't for everybody; they were exclusively for a certain type of fugitive - someone who committed manslaughter.

‘A person who kills any person without intent may flee there.’

By comparison with our modern, western world, the Ancient Near East of the Exodus was pretty brutal. Justice was swift and final. If someone was killed, a relative of the victim was expected to avenge that death by killing the perpetrator.

These people were called in Hebrew – go-el – ‘The avenger of blood.’ Family honor was at stake. The avenger of blood was expected to apply the biblical principal of justice – an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth – a life for a life.

The six Cities of Refuge were for those who had accidentally killed somebody, who could themselves be justifiably killed by the go-el – the avenger of blood. Like the horns of the altar in the sanctuary, the City of Refuge was safe haven from indiscriminate, retributive justice. Here is how it worked, based on what scripture commanded and how Jewish tradition developed.

Tom and Harry are out chopping firewood, and Tom is swinging his axe and all of a sudden the axe head flies from the axe handle, hits Harry flush in the temple, who falls dead in a heap. Tom is in trouble, not as much trouble as Harry, who is dead, but deep trouble nonetheless. From that moment on Tom could be justifiably killed by one of Harry’s relatives – an ‘avenger of blood.’ His only hope is to flee to a City of Refuge.

If you think this sounds far-fetched, it actually gives this example in Deuteronomy:

If anyone kills his neighbor unintentionally without having hated him in the past—as when someone goes into the forest with his neighbor to cut wood, and his hand swings the axe to cut down a tree, and the head slips from the handle and strikes his neighbor so that he dies—he may flee to one of these cities and live.  
(Deuteronomy 19:4-5)

So the manslayer – there’s a great title- flees to the nearest City of Refuge. The cities inhabitants – all from the tribe of Levi – priests – always let them in. They would then hear his case to establish whether he was guilty of manslaughter or murder. Now, if you have ever wondered where the basic foundations of our criminal justice system come from, wonder no longer. More than three thousand years ago, God established these principles of evidence – all recorded in the scriptures - that needed to be considered.

First, what was the nature of the object that caused death? For example, if it was an object made of stone or iron that could lend weight to the belief that the manslayer had murderous intent.

Second, was the action that caused death premeditated, or was their history of hatred between the victim and manslayer?

Third, before a person could be convicted of murder and sentenced to death, their needed to be corroborating evidence of at least two witnesses.

If after hearing his case the inhabitants of the city find the man guilty of manslaughter, rather than murder, they would allow him to stay and so protect him from the avenger of blood. That was the good news. The bad news was that the moment they set foot outside the city boundaries, they could be still killed by the avenger of blood, who in doing so would be guilty of no crime. In effect, the manslayer was trapped in the city of refuge for the term of his natural life.

This highlights an important point; Cities of Refuge functioned as punishment for the person guilty of unintentional homicide and as protection from the avenger of blood. It easy to understand protection – if you have an avenger of blood roaming the countryside looking for you, refuge sounds like a fantastic idea. But why was punishment necessary if the crime was accidental and unintentional?

The Jewish Talmud, which is an ancient and detailed commentary explaining and applying biblical law, says Cities of Refuge were a means of punishment. The Rabbis understood that an entirely innocent person could never be the instrument of another person's death. The Rabbi, Philo, who lived around the time of Jesus, said this:

The manslayer is exiled to a city of refuge, where he must remain until the death of the high priest, in expiation (atonement/compensation) of some sins that he must have committed, because an entirely innocent man is never chosen as the instrument of another man's death.

(Philo)

The Jews believed that while a manslayer may not be guilty of premeditated murder, they carried guilt worthy of some punishment nonetheless. And it was punishment; a life time under virtual house arrest. The cities of refuge were actually no larger than a small town; large enough so that a fugitive had no need to leave to find food or supplies, but small enough that an avenger of blood couldn't hide himself and kill the manslayer. Punishment took the form of a claustrophobic life cut off from family and freedom.

If they tried to leave the city of refuge, the avenger of blood could kill them without consequences the moment they set one foot outside the city boundaries. The manslayer was trapped. Their only hope of a safe return home was if the high priest died. In Numbers we read:

After the death of the high priest the manslayer may return to the land of his possession.

(Numbers 35:28)

When the high priest of the city of refuge died, the manslayer could safely return home. The avenger of blood was no longer permitted to kill them. They were free; the punishment had been lifted. Why did the death of one man – the high priest – make such a difference?

In Leviticus it says that even if a person commits a sin unintentionally, they must atone for their sin through blood sacrifice to God. Once made, then they are they forgiven.

Further, in numerous places the bible teaches that no payment atones (compensates) for the death of a human being other than the death of another human being.

And so even though the bible does not explicitly say it, it is implicit that the death of the high priest atones for the death of the person the manslayer accidentally killed. Now that their crime had been atoned for, they were free.

Interestingly, the Talmud says the mother of the high priest would take the responsibility for the feeding and clothing fugitives because she knew they had the incentive of freedom to kill her son!

There is so much more I could say about Cities of Refuge – so much that today is part one of a two part message. I will preach part 2 in a couple of weeks. For now, let's hit the pause button and consider for a few moments what relevance all this might have for us, if any relevance at all.

I happen to think what we learn through the Cities of Refuge is wonderfully, beautifully and profoundly relevant. First, the Cities of Refuge remind us that:

### **Grace bleeds through every page of the bible**

Grace is the undeserved and unmerited favor of God. Grace is a gift to be receive, not a reward to be earned. Grace is multi-faceted diamond revealing aspects of God's beautiful character - – like mercy, forgiveness, love and patience. Sometimes we Christians live with the dangerous illusion that grace has nothing to do with the Old Testament, that grace shows up only in the New Testament. John does tell is that Jesus was full of grace and truth – the complete revelation of God's love.

Grace did not appear with Jesus; grace was fully revealed in Jesus.

Grace bleeds through every page of the bible.

Through the Cities of Refuge God ensured that that innocent blood was not spilled, so polluting the land. If an avenger of blood killed a person guilty of only manslaughter, innocent blood would be spilled and the land polluted. And if the land was polluted with innocent blood, the bible said the land would eventually be lost by Israel. Grace.

Through the Cities of Refuge a person guilty of manslaughter could escape a brutal death without trial at the hands of the avenger of blood. Grace.

The Cities of Refuge anticipated Israel's future failure and were God's gracious provision to triumph over them.

Grace anticipates our failures and provides the means to triumph over them.

Grace bleeds through every page of the bible.

### **Every page of the bible points to Jesus**

For the last six months or so many of us have been reading our way through the Old Testament. Some of us might think, 'What's the point – we're New Testament people!' But what riches we miss if we choose to ignore the Old Testament.

Stories, images, teaching, characters and symbols found in the Old Testament point to, and find their ultimate fulfillment in Jesus – including the cities of refuge. In Hebrews we read:

We who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us. We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain, where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest forever.  
(Hebrews 6:18-20)

Who is the writer referring to when he says 'we who have fled for refuge'? He is referring to those who, convicted of their sin, have fled from the guilt, shame and regrets of their past to Jesus, seeking refuge in him.

I am not aware that we have any manslayers in this church. We may have. But I do know this; in this church there are drunks, liars, adulterers, cheats and gossips. Today you may well be sitting alongside someone crippled by greed, or jealousy, or envy or pride or lust or a destructive addiction. In short, this is a church, like all churches, filled with sinners.

The bible is really clear; all have sinned and have fallen short of the glory of God. Equally direct, the bible says that the wages – the consequences of our sin, is death. Like the manslayer of the Old Testament, we have a death sentence hanging over us; an eternal death sentence; the awful reality of being forever separated from a holy God by our sin. This is the bad news that makes the good news of the gospel just so good. Our only hope is to flee for refuge and the promise of grace.

'We who have fled for refuge'

Immersed as he was in the stories and theology of the Old Testament, as his readers were, the writer of Hebrews is deliberately applying the theology behind the cities of refuge to Jesus. He is saying that in Jesus we - sinners under the sentence of death - have a sure and certain hope, an anchor for our soul – a refuge – an eternal refuge.

### **More even than the Cities of Refuge – Jesus is Easy to Reach**

The six cities of refuge were all within easy reach of the 12 tribes of Israel. A few days travel at most. The Jewish Talmud tells us that the roads leading to the six cities of refuge were always well maintained, bridges always intact and well signposted. The

custom was even to have guides at crossroads to direct fleeing manslayers towards refuge. Again, the Talmud tells us that the gates of the cities of refuge were always open. Every potential obstacle to a fugitive was removed.

Far more even than the cities of refuge, Jesus is easy to reach. Here is how amazing God's grace is - here is why John described Jesus as full of grace and truth. Before even we decide to flee for refuge in him, Jesus comes to us. Before we knock on his door seeking sanctuary, Jesus knock on the door of our heart seeking to take up residence in our life. Jesus, right here, right now says to every fugitive from the past in this room:

Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.

(Revelation 3:20)

In his grace, God does not wait for us to come to him. By grace, God comes to us.

Grace does not wait for us to knock seeking sanctuary; grace knocks on the door of our hearts offering sanctuary!

Bob Goff, one of the speakers at GLS, puts it this way:

Grace would climb stairs three at a time to reach us.

(Bob Goff)

Sanctuary in Jesus is easy to reach; it's a simple prayer away. 'Jesus, I hear you knocking on the door of my heart. Come in.'

### **More even than the Cities of Refuge - Jesus is Available to All**

The cities of refuge were God's gracious provision not just for Israel, but for any person, no matter their race or nationality.

These six cities shall be for refuge for the people of Israel, and for the stranger and sojourner among them.

(Deuteronomy 35:15)

Grace is outrageously indiscriminate.

Like the cities of refuge, Jesus is available to all, no matter their background or history. But while the cities of refuge were available to a people in a part of God's world in one era of time, the grace of Jesus is available to all people, in all the world, for all of time.

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

(John 3:16)

Whoever, whenever no matter whatever can find eternal refuge in and through Jesus. Hallelujah!

### **More even than the Cities of Refuge - Jesus is our Eternal Refuge**

For as long as he was alive, the manslayer could enjoy safety and sanctuary in the city of refuge. But he was trapped there. One step outside and he risked his life to the avenger of blood. His only hope for true freedom was the death of the High Priest. Only when he died could he go home. With the death of the high priest came freedom.

But even then, the manslayer still carried the weight of his mistakes with him. And he would still die.

The writer of Hebrews calls Jesus our 'high priest forever'. What does that mean?

Like the high priests in the cities of refuge, Jesus died. The only difference was that Jesus died a brutal death on a cross.

But unlike the high priests in the cities of refuge, Jesus rose from the grave and conquered the grave, after which he ascended to heaven where he is now seated at the right hand of the Father.

Jesus is our eternal high priest; our forever high priest.

John Acuff states the truth:

Your past is a museum. Beautiful to visit sometimes but a horrible place to live.  
(John Acuff)

With his death, we are set free from the guilt and shame of our past. We no longer need to live in our past, or be chained to it. Through his death, Jesus cuts the chains!

In his resurrection we are liberated into a new, eternal future.

By faith, his life is our life. By faith, his inheritance is our inheritance. By faith, his resurrection is our resurrection. Hallelujah!

Alan Scott puts it this way:

The beauty of grace is that it creates a space where people who have a past can have a future.  
(Alan Scott)

We have a mission team travelling home from Cambodia this weekend. In her book *The God Who Hung on the Cross*, Ellen Vaughn retells the story of how the Gospel came to a small village in that nation. In September 1999 Pastor Tuy Seng travelled to remote province in northern Cambodia. Throughout that isolated area, most villagers were Buddhist. Christianity was virtually unheard of.

Much to Seng's surprise, when he arrived in one small, rural village the people warmly embraced him and his message about Jesus. When he asked the villagers about their openness to the gospel, an old woman shuffled forward, bowed, and grasped Seng's hands as she said, "We have been waiting for you for twenty years." And then she told him the story of the mysterious God who had hung on the cross.

In the 1970s the Khmer Rouge, the brutal, Communist-led regime, took over Cambodia, destroying everything in its path. When the soldiers finally descended on this rural, northern village in 1979, they immediately rounded up the villagers and forced them to start digging their own graves. After the villagers had finished digging, they prepared themselves to die. Some screamed to Buddha, others screamed to demon spirits or to their ancestors.

One of the women started to cry for help based on a childhood memory—a story her mother told her about a God who had hung on a cross. The woman prayed to that unknown God on a cross. Surely, if this God had known suffering, he would have compassion on their plight.

Suddenly, her solitary cry became one great wail as the entire village started praying to the God who had suffered and hung on a cross. As they continued facing their own graves, the wailing slowly turned to a quiet crying. There was an eerie silence in the muggy jungle air. Slowly, as they dared to turn around and face their captors, they discovered that the soldiers were gone.

As the old woman finished telling this story, she told Pastor Seng that ever since that humid day from 20 years ago the villagers had been waiting, waiting for someone to come and share the rest of the story about the God who had hung on a cross.

From the moment we are born we are digging our graves with our sin. That's the bad news. Our only hope is to find sanctuary in the God who made us and loved us. The bible is clear; those who call upon the name of the Lord – the name of the God who hung on the cross –shall be saved. If you haven't done so already, why not call on him now?