

4. The fact that these cities were for the use of both Israel and the sojourner reminds us that salvation in Christ is available to all—regardless if the person was in the “wilderness” or in the “land,” “bad” or “good” (Mt. 22:10). That the “road” of salvation is easily accessible is the testimony of multitudes through the ages who, like the thief on the cross, can attest that nothing more is needed than simple faith in Christ.

5. The manslayer was instructed to flee to one of these cities immediately to escape vengeance from the “avenger of blood.” The sinner likewise is exhorted to flee to Christ before it is eternally too late, lest he die in his sins. “Behold now is the accepted time, behold now is the day of salvation...” (2 Cor. 6:2). The manslayer was urged not to linger outside the city gates, lest the “avenger of blood” find him and execute justice. This is illustrated in the life of Abner who had accidentally killed Joab’s brother Asahel (2 Sam. 2:23-4). David lamented “Died Abner as a fool dies?” (2 Sam 3:33), mourning Abner’s death at the hand of Joab who killed him just outside the gates of the refuge city of Hebron. How like those who foolishly put off trusting Christ, and like Abner are in jeopardy of dying “as a fool dies” outside God’s appointed place of refuge.

Despite the many similarities, there are some contrasts, however, between the cities of refuge and the Person of Christ. Once safely within the city, the manslayer would have to go to trial before a congregation to determine his guilt or innocence. The sinner who takes refuge in the finished work of Christ is assured by Christ Himself that he will never come into judgment. “He that heareth My Word and believeth on Him that sent Me hath everlasting life and shall not come into condemnation, but is passed from death unto life” (John 5:24). Out salvation in Christ is forever secure and there is never any fear that after being saved our protection will ever be in jeopardy.

Additionally, the manslayer was allowed to return safely to his home on the death of the high priest. In Christ, believers have a great High Priest whose priesthood is unchanging. One who “ever liveth to make intercession” for us (Heb. 7:25). Therefore we are forever safe in Him. Indeed, there are many wonderful lessons for us in the cities of refuge. But the most wonderful lesson to us is the one seen at Calvary. Jeered by a crowd representing all humanity, Christ cried out from the cross, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” Ignorant of whom He really was—God manifest in flesh—they erroneously believed that they were only crucifying a man who claimed to be the Son of God. Though deliberate in their actions, they were ignorant of who they were acting against.

When the Lord cried out, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do,” it was His request to the Father to acknowledge the ignorance of their deed. By so doing, the charge of deliberate murder against the Son of God that could have been made against the people was in a sense reduced to manslaughter—thus opening the way to God’s City of Refuge for “unintentional” killing of His Son—the Lord Jesus Christ.

Although God has the right to avenge the miscarriage at Calvary, He views the world as responsible for the death of Christ because of the blindness of their hearts through sin. Despite this, however, God’s love and grace still provides for the safety of the guilty sinner who acknowledges his actions, senses his need, and avails himself of the protection that God offers in Christ.

Subsequent to Pentecost, the Apostle Peter acknowledged this ignorance on Israel’s part (Acts 3:17) when he said, “Now, brethren, I know that through ignorance you did it,” thus offering again the way of salvation to the guilty nation. Likewise, the Apostle Paul, speaking to the Corinthians, spoke of this same ignorance on the part of the Gentiles when he said, “For had they known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory” (1 Cor. 2:8).

Biographically, the Apostle Paul also testified for the grace and forgiveness of God offered him despite his violent opposition to the early Church, as he gratefully acknowledged that “he obtained mercy because he did it ignorantly in unbelief” (1 Tim. 1:13).

How thankful the manslayer must have been when he safely reached his city of refuge! And how thankful we who know the Lord ought to be that, like the manslayer, we too have reached our City of Refuge and are forever safe inside!

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The Cities of Refuge

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The lessons that come to us from the cities of refuge are instructive and help to broaden our understanding and deepen our appreciation for the sinner's provision made available through the finished work of Christ. In the Old Testament, God made provision for the person who committed manslaughter—the unintentional killing of another individual. In five separate passages (Ex. 21:12-14; Num. 35:6-34; Deut. 4:41-43; 19:1-13; and Josh. 20:1-9) God gives thorough instruction for the establishment and use of cities of refuge—places designated as a safe haven for the manslayer. Needing protection from the bereft relative, the manslayer could be lawfully sheltered from vengeance, but only if he immediately fled to one of these appointed cities.

Conceived by God, the appointment of these cities was the primary responsibility of Moses who was instructed to select six cities from among the 48 Levitical cities prior to entering the land of Canaan (Num. 35:6-8). Three were to be established in the wilderness on the east side of Jordan, and three were to be located on the west side of the Jordan in Canaan (v.14).

Because of his sin at Meribah, Moses was not permitted to enter the land at that time and only the three wilderness cities were appointed—Bezer east of the Dead Sea, Ramoth in Gilead, and Golan northeast of the Sea of Galilee (Deut. 4:41-43). After the conquest of Canaan, the task was completed by Joshua who established the other three cities all located in the mountains west of the Jordan—Kedesh in Naphtali, Shechem in the Samaritan Hills, and Hebron in Judah (Josh. 20:70). Highly visible, well-marked, and with clear roads (Deut. 19:3), these cities were readily accessible to anyone who would need them. They were not for the exclusive benefit of Israel, but were also for “the sojourner and the stranger among them” (Num 35:15).

No matter where a person was—in the wilderness or in Canaan—these cities were not far away and thus easily reachable. Numbers 35 and Deuteronomy 19 give the possible scenarios in which a person could qualify for the protection offered by these cities. As long as there was no hint of premeditation and death appeared to be accidental, the manslayer could flee to any one of these cities and be sheltered. Otherwise, he would have to pay for the life he took with his own. This provision of safety, however, was not automatic—it required that the manslayer flee immediately to the nearest city lest the “avenger of blood” kill him before he reached it.

Arriving at the gates of the city, he would have to “declare his case” before the elders who would judge



whether or not it was an accidental killing (Josh. 20:4). If they deemed it was not accidental, he would be turned over to the “avenger of blood” who could lawfully require the life of the manslayer at his own hand (Deut. 19:12). If however, the elders assessed that the killing was unintentional, then the manslayer would be allowed to dwell in that city until a later time when his case was tried by a separate congregation.

Again, if it was determined that he was guilty of murder, he would be turned over to the “avenger of blood”. If he was deemed innocent, then he was allowed to stay within the city until the death of the high priest, at which time he was allowed to return safely to his hometown. Safety was only within the city of refuge and the only caution was that if he wandered at anytime outside the city limits during his time there, it would be at the risk of his own life should be avenger find him (Num 35:24-28).

Apart from the practical aspect of protection that these cities offered, they also serve as an important picture of the Person and Work of Christ. In Hebrews 6:18, the writer makes a pointed reference to Christ as the One to whom believers have “fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope set before us.”

To anyone familiar with the Old Testament Scriptures—especially a Hebrew—this designation of Christ as a “refuge” strikes a familiar chord. It is a clear allusion paralleling these cities with the salvation that is offered in Christ. Though there are differences at points, the similarities between them are numerous. What are some of the outstanding characteristics of these cities that make them similar to the work of Christ?

1. They were God's provision for the protection of the guilty offender. Because of his actions, the manslayer needed protection from the “avenger of blood” and this he received when he fled to a city of refuge. Likewise, the guilty sinner is protected from the judgment that his sins deserve by fleeing to Christ. The

Bible declares that “all have sinned and come short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). Created in God's image but having violated His moral law, all of mankind is under God's condemnation and therefore subject to the penalty for sin, which is death (Rom 6:23). As a sovereign God, Jehovah has the right to see that justice is served upon the guilty sinner for actions committed against the Son of His love. But just as the manslayer had a place of refuge, so too the world has a shelter in the Lord Jesus Christ—God's perfect provision for sin. The blood that sheltered the children of Israel while the death angel passed through the land in Egypt pictures the same type of protection that every manslayer needed and that every believer in Christ enjoys.

2. Further, the concept of the cities of refuge did not originate with Moses or Joshua, but was provided by God. It was not something they conceived, but rather it was in the heart and mind of God, who instructed them to establish these cities. Similarly, salvation by grace alone through Christ is not man's idea, but God's—His unique plan conceived in love by Him from His heart and mind from “the foundations of the world”, and providing salvation for the helpless sinner.

3. These cities were the only means of safety and were nearby, well-marked, and accessible to all. No other place of city offered the same protection as these. To go to any other was both useless and foolish. Likewise, Acts 4:12 reminds us that “there is none other Name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved.” Christ is the sinner's only means of refuge. He made it clear Himself when He said: “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life; no man cometh unto the father, but by Me” (John 14:6). Additionally, these cities were nearby and strategically located so that the person in need was never far away—no matter where he was—from availing himself of the safety provided by these appointed cities. The roads leading to these cities were well-marked and clear (Deut. 19:3) so that the manslayer would be unhindered once he began his flight to a particular city.

So it is also with salvation in Christ. The Apostle Paul reminded the Athenians on Mars Hill that Christ is “not far from any one of us” (Acts 17:27). He is never so far away that the person who recognizes his need cannot avail himself of Him. Like these elevated cities, He is “highly visible” in the sense that the salvation that the grace of God brings “hath appeared to all men” (Titus 2:11). God has given “Him a Name which is above every name” (Phil 2:9). Once the step of faith has been taken toward Christ, God provides a clear road that brings the guilty sinner to the place of refuge.