

And Justice for All  
 Joshua 20:1-9  
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This past week a Minneapolis police officer appears to have accidentally shot a young man in a routine traffic stop. The video shows the young man resisting arrest and trying to flee the scene. The female officer threatened to taser him, but instead of using her taser, her pistol was set to the ammunition setting, and she did not know it, and she accidentally shot the man. The young man was able to drive off but eventually crashed his car and died. As a result of her actions, the female officer resigned from the police force, and now she faces manslaughter charges for accidentally killing the young man.

This situation of manslaughter is what Joshua 20:1-9 addresses. So, let's ask a question about the text. Why did God provide cities of refuge? Here is my answer. God provided cities of refuge for the manslayer to teach us that justice and mercy are not a given in a world broken by sin. Justice and mercy are only found in one place, and it is the place God provides—Jesus Christ.

So, let's unpack and apply these nine verses by asking three questions of the text. I will ask the questions; then we will consider the original context and then also look forward to how Jesus is the fulfillment. First question.

### **I. Why do we need a place of refuge?**

Then the Lord said to Joshua, <sup>2</sup>“Say to the people of Israel, ‘Appoint the cities of refuge, of which I spoke to you through Moses, <sup>3</sup> 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.

Yahweh knew that His people would commit manslaughter. Whether the death may have occurred through negligence or a freak accident, the person who committed manslaughter bears responsibility. He wanted to teach the people that while the person should receive justice, there should be mercy. So, let's consider our question.

Why do we need a place of refuge? First of all, we need a place of shelter because we are all sinners. When we consider this text, what God knew was even the most faithful of His people would at some point unintentionally kill another person.

Think about it. Here is a godly Israelite who loves God with all of his heart, soul, mind, and strength and loves his neighbor in the same way he loves himself. He is doing his best to keep the whole of the law and not murder or kill. Then one day, he is helping his neighbor work on his roof, and he accidentally bumped into him and knocked him off the roof, and it killed him. Someone might think he pushed him, but he didn't. He unintentionally killed his neighbor. He committed manslaughter. However, the person who is responsible for justice is the avenger of blood. This person is the family protector, and he is seeking the death penalty for this sin. The guy who committed manslaughter needed a place of refuge until his case could be presented.

The fact is we all need a place of refuge because all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. You may be thinking, “But I have never unintentionally killed my neighbor or anyone for that matter.” You might think that, but we do not live our lives according to our standards of righteousness but according to God's.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches us that keeping the Law is more than externally keeping the Law. It is a matter of the heart, and when it comes to the heart, we cannot control our intentions. Listen to what Jesus says in Matthew 5:21-23, 26.

You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' <sup>22</sup> But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire . . . <sup>26</sup> Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

Jesus takes our anger, whether intentional or unintentional and puts it on the same level as murder. The fact is there is not one of us who has ever been in control of a knee-jerk reaction of anger. At some point in our lives, we have lost it and sinned in anger.

What Jesus did in these verses was to indict us all. He helps us see that we are all murders, whether we intentionally or unintentionally got angry.

Jesus' purpose was to help us understand that Law-keeping is not merely external but is a matter of the heart. It is a matter of desires and motives because we always do what we most love. When we evaluate the motives and desires of our hearts, we realize we are very depraved.

The fact is we may not carry out the sin that enters our hearts, but Jesus teaches us that even the desire is sin and is the same as doing it. Jesus takes the Law, and He internalizes it, and His point is that the Law has always been a matter of the heart and to break the Law from the heart is still sin.

So, what does this mean? Number one: We need a place of refuge because we all have sinned and broken the Law of God from the heart. We have fallen short of His holiness and His righteousness, and so we deserve punishment.

We all stand guilty before God, and because we have sinned against Him and our enemy, the avenger of blood is seeking punishment for our sin. We have an enemy in Satan who stands accusing us night and day before God for our sin. We need a place of refuge because we stand accused and guilty before a Holy God.

Secondly, we need a place of refuge because human life is sacred. Joshua 20 is teaching us about the sanctity of human life.

Joshua 20 does not come out of thin air. It is based on Deuteronomy 4:41-43, Deuteronomy 19:1-13, and Numbers 35:9-34. In these texts, God told Moses and Joshua that after the land was conquered, they were to designate cities of refuge. All of these texts teach us about the sanctity of human life because people are created in the image of God. This means it is a sin to intentionally or unintentionally kill another person.

What this means is that the lives of men, women, teenagers, children, babies, and babies in the womb are precious and sacred because they are created in the very image of God. It is fairly easy for us to consider the life of a living, breathing human being that we can see with our eyes as a life that is sacred.

However, you may have never considered that the lives of the unborn are sacred to God. You may have never thought that abortion is the taking of a human life.

The fact is you may be here this morning, and you have had an abortion, but you never realized that abortion was the killing of a person created in the image of God in the womb. Whether your abortion was by a surgical procedure or by using what they call the morning after pill or even using birth control pills that prevent a fertilized egg from attaching to the womb; you did not know it was the killing of a sacred human life that was created in the image of God.

You may struggle to believe that. However, we must take God at His word, and from cover to cover, the Word of God teaches us that He is the One who opens and closes the womb. He teaches us that children are a gift of God.

The psalmist says to God in Psalm 139:13 says:

For you formed my inward parts;  
you knitted me together in my mother's womb.

My friends, you may have been lied to about abortion by well-meaning persons or family members or Planned Parenthood or your doctor. Then you learned that abortion by any means was the killing of a life. You realize that you have unintentionally taken a human life. When you learned it was murder, it broke your heart, and now you feel guilty, dirty, and unworthy to be loved.

Look at me and listen to me very closely; I am glad you are here. I want you to know; this church loves you. I want you to know that the Lord has provided you a place of refuge in Christ and this church. You need to know you are in good company with a church full of sinners who need a place of refuge. There is not one person here who is better than any other person. Grand Avenue is a church filled with sinners seeking refuge together in Christ. This leads me to my second point.

## **II. Where is our place of refuge? (vv. 4-9)**

<sup>4</sup> 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. Then they shall take him into the city and give him a place, and he shall remain with them. <sup>5</sup> And if the avenger of blood pursues him, they shall not give up the manslayer into his hand because he struck his neighbor unknowingly and did not hate him in the past. <sup>6</sup> And he shall remain in that city until he has stood before the congregation for judgment, until the death of him who is high priest at the time. Then the manslayer may return to his own town and his own home, to the town from which he fled.' "

<sup>7</sup> So they set apart Kedesh in Galilee in the hill country of Naphtali, and Shechem in the hill country of Ephraim, and Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron) in the hill country of Judah. <sup>8</sup> And beyond the Jordan east of Jericho, they appointed Bezer in the wilderness on the tableland, from the tribe of Reuben, and Ramoth in Gilead, from the tribe of Gad, and Golan in Bashan, from the tribe of Manasseh. <sup>9</sup> 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.

What we learn from these verses is very important. God is the One who determines where our place of refuge is.

The Israelites did not just run to any old city for refuge; they fled to cities that God had designated as cities of refuge.

Here is what you need to understand about the cities of refuge. These cities were not designated from random tribes of Israel; they were designated from the cities of the Levites.

Last Sunday, Pastor Eric touched on the inheritance for the Levites. He will cover it in more detail next Sunday. If you remember, they did not receive any land as their inheritance. They received a few cities and pastures, but primarily they were scattered throughout Israel, living in all of the cities and representing Yahweh and leading God's people in worship. What we learn about the tribe of Levi was they received the best inheritance of all—Yahweh was their Inheritance. Deuteronomy 10:9 says:

Therefore Levi has no portion or inheritance with his brothers. The Lord is his inheritance, as the Lord your God said to him.

What this means is that when the manslayer fled to the city of refuge, he was fleeing to the inheritance of the Levites. In essence, he was fleeing to Yahweh as His Refuge.

Brothers and sisters, this is what we need. We need to flee to Christ as our Refuge for our sin. He is our City of Refuge, and when we flee to Him, He puts us in the company of a whole host of refugees who have found their refuge in Christ. The local church is a City of Refuge for the people of God.

Consider the beauty of what God is teaching us. God says if you have sinned against Me, do not seek refuge for your sin in anyone else nor in your good works nor trying to work off your guilt nor repay your debt of sin but flee to Me. Psalm 62:7-8 says:

<sup>7</sup> On God rests my salvation and my glory;  
my mighty rock, my refuge is God.  
<sup>8</sup> Trust in him at all times, O people;  
pour out your heart before him;  
God is a refuge for us. Selah

The psalmist called God's people to find their rest and refuge in God and to pour out their hearts to Him. This was what the sinner in Joshua 20:9 was to do. He was to flee to the city of refuge and pour out his case to the Levite elders and seek refuge in their inheritance.

If the Levite elders found the manslayer not guilty, they were to allow him to live in the city of refuge in order to be protected from the avenger of blood.

Then the manslayer was allowed to live there until the high priest of that day died. We are not sure why that was the case, but it seems that because the high priest was the representative of God's people before God that when He died, it somehow symbolized the atoning death of the Ultimate High Priest—the Lord Jesus Christ.

Hebrews 6:18-20 says:

. . . we who have fled [to Jesus] for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us. <sup>19</sup> We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain<sup>1</sup>,  
<sup>20</sup> where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.

The Lord Jesus Christ is the church's High Priest who made atonement for all sin, both intentional and unintentional. It is to the Lord Jesus where we seek our rest and refuge. This leads me to our last question.

### **III. How do we enter this place of refuge?**

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<sup>1</sup> How did Jesus enter behind the curtain? He entered by His death on the cross. Jesus is the High Priest who died and to make true and perfect atonement for the sin of God's people.

Here is where we leave the pattern of Joshua 20:1-9 and look to Christ. To enter the city of refuge, the person had to prove his innocence.

However, to find our refuge in Jesus Christ's and His church, we do not proclaim our innocence but our guilt. In other words, it is to Jesus that we pour out our soul, but we are not by proclaiming our innocence but by confessing our guilt.

Bottom line: to know Christ as your place of refuge, you must admit you are a sinner and seek to turn from your sin and turn to Christ. We call this repentance. You turn from your sin and to Jesus. You confess your sin to Him and call on His name for your salvation, and He becomes your Refuge, and He places you in His church as a physical place of refuge until He returns.

You see, it is the crucifixion of our Ultimate High Priest, the Lord Jesus Christ, who atoned for our sin. It is His death that removed the penalty of the avenger of blood. Those who flee to Christ are no longer under the condemnation for their bloodguilt of sin.

Jesus becomes your Advocate before the Judge who declares you are innocent because He has paid your debt of sin. He becomes your atonement for your sin because as your High Priest He has paid your debt of sin and freed you from the penalty of your sin. He becomes your Refuge to which you can flee for rest and protection. In reality, He has set you free in Him.

Brothers and sisters, this is the best news ever! Jesus is the Refuge for sinners. Do you know someone who needs to hear the good news of the gospel so they can flee to Jesus?

Think about it this way. In the Old Testament, the avenger of blood sought out the sinner in order to exact justice by killing the guilty person. However, our responsibility now is to seek out the sinner to share the good news of the gospel. Their blood has been avenged because the Son of God died for their sin on the cross, and then He rose from the dead to defeat sin and death.

So, let me ask you, who is it that you know needs Jesus? We all know someone. We all have one person who we need to be praying for and asking God to help us understand and believe the gospel and call on Christ for salvation.

Let me show you one more thing. Our little outline of Joshua 20:1-9 will help you share the gospel with them. You don't have to use Joshua 20:1-9, but you can simply walk them through the questions and talk about Jesus.

1. Why do you need a place of refuge?

Because we are all sinners, Romans 3:23 says. "For all have all sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

2. Where is the place of refuge?

Acts 4:12 says, "And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."

3. How do you enter this place of refuge?

Romans 10:9-10, 13, "Because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. <sup>10</sup> For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved . . . For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

You can take this little outline, pray it for your friend or family member and then seek an opportunity to share the gospel with them. Let me ask you: who is your one. Who is the one person you need to share Christ with today?

I've got more good news for you this morning. Perhaps you are here today, and you know Christ as your Lord and Savior, but you are feeling the weight of suffering in your life. Maybe it is not your sin from which you need refuge, but you come to worship this morning with the weight of suffering weighing heavy on your heart. The world is broken by sin, and you need refuge from the suffering sin has caused. Psalm 46 reminds us:

<sup>1</sup> God is our refuge<sup>2</sup> and strength,  
a very present help in trouble.  
<sup>2</sup> Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way,  
though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea,  
<sup>3</sup> though its waters roar and foam,  
though the mountains tremble at its swelling. Selah  
<sup>4</sup> There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,  
the holy habitation of the Most High.  
<sup>5</sup> God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved;  
God will help her when morning dawns.  
<sup>6</sup> The nations rage, the kingdoms totter;  
he utters his voice, the earth melts.  
<sup>7</sup> The Lord of hosts is with us;  
the God of Jacob is our fortress. Selah  
<sup>8</sup> Come, behold the works of the Lord,  
how he has brought desolations on the earth.  
<sup>9</sup> He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;  
he breaks the bow and shatters the spear;  
he burns the chariots with fire.  
<sup>10</sup> "Be still, and know that I am God.  
I will be exalted among the nations,  
I will be exalted in the earth!"  
<sup>11</sup> The Lord of hosts is with us;  
the God of Jacob is our fortress. Selah

Brother and sister in Christ, refuge is a person, and His name is Jesus. Flee to Him.

Also, we need to be reminded that on this earth, the physical representation of Christ is the body of Christ—His church. When you flee to Jesus, you flee to His church as a city of refuge.

Friend, if you are here this morning and you have never trusted Christ, we invite you to join us as we take refuge in Jesus in this broken world. Flee to Him today. Talk to one of the refugees of Grand Avenue Baptist Church or talk to me after this service and let him/her or me explain to you how to flee to Jesus.

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<sup>2</sup> The word for refuge in Joshua 20:3 and Psalm 46:1 are different Hebrew words. Yet, when you take them together they give us the full picture of how Jesus provides us Refuge. The word for refuge in Joshua 20:3 comes from the root word to *take in or accept in*. The word for refuge in Psalm 46:1 means place of refuge. When we flee to Christ for refuge, He accepts us into Himself and He becomes our Refuge. Refuge is a person and His name is Jesus.