

After God led His people out of Egypt, through the wilderness, and into the Promised Land(应许之地) of Israel, He divided the land on the east and west sides of the Jordan River among the 12 tribes (支派) of Israel. After the tribes had settled into their assigned territories, God commanded Israel to appoint Cities of Refuge (逃城) throughout the whole land of Israel. They were to set aside 6 Cities of Refuge, 3 on the west side of the Jordan River (Kedesh, Shechem, and Hebron), and 3 on the east side (Bezer, Ramoth-Gilead, and Golan). These 6 cities were to spaced apart equally, and have good roads leading to them, so that everyone could have easy and ready access to them from anywhere in the nation. (see Deuteronomy 19:1-3)

Today let us hear God's Word about the Cities of Refuge: 1) **For whom** did God appoint these cities, 2) **Why** did God appoint these cities, 3) and **Where do we find** the Cities of Refuge today? [learn more about these cities in **Deuteronomy 19** and **Numbers 35**]

For whom did God appoint the Cities of Refuge?

Joshua 20: ¹The LORD also spoke to Joshua, saying, ²“Speak to the children of Israel, saying: ‘Appoint for yourselves cities of refuge, of which I spoke to you through Moses, ³ that the slayer who kills a person accidentally may flee there; and they shall be your refuge from the avenger of blood. (3 使那无心而误杀人的, 可以逃到那里。这些城可以作你们逃避报血仇人的地方。)

Let me begin with a very sad story about the Christian songwriter, Steven Curtis Chapman, and his wife Maribeth. Steven & Maribeth have 6 children. The first 3 children are biological children and the second 3 are adopted children from China. A few years ago their oldest son was coming home from work in his car, and as he was turning into the driveway, the youngest child, Maria, came running over to the car to greet him. He didn't see his little sister, struck her, and she was killed. 2 years later, the mother, Maribeth, wrote: *If I could change one thing, we all know what that could be. I wish we could go back to May 21, 2 years ago, and have a redo. But we can't. We must rest in God's strength. I thought the sadness might become less over time, and the pain might decrease, but it does not. Yet God's grace has upheld us in ways we did not think were possible. We thank you all for your constant prayers.*

I tell this story **not** because it is so unique, but because accidental deaths like this are so common. Often these accidents are avoidable, and we say, “*If I could do it all over again...*”, but we can't! To understand Joshua 20 we need to feel the pain that lies behind the Cities of Refuge. These “Safe Cities” were given to Israel because tragic accidents do happen in this fallen world, leading even to death. These accidents cause deep, almost unbearable (难以承受的) pain on both sides. On the side of the one who caused the death, there is the immense pain of regret and a sense of guilt by the killer and his loved ones. On the side of the one who was killed, the loved ones experience the grief and anger of irretrievable (不可挽回的) loss.

When terrible accidents happen, we need a place of refuge (避难) where we can find safety. Our just and merciful God, who in His providence (神的护理) oversees all the accidents that happen, knows we need a place of refuge and provides such a place for us. He provided 6 Cities of Refuge in Israel. The word ‘refuge’ means ‘asylum’ (避难所) or ‘a place of safety from punishment.’ If a person committed manslaughter (过失杀人) he could **“flee to one of these cities and save his life.”** (Deuteronomy 4:42)

The Law of Moses distinguishes between those who kill *intentionally* and out of malice, and those who kill *accidentally* or unintentionally. Those who kill intentionally lie in wait for the one they hate and, when their time is right, they strike. This is the sin of murder and God requires the blood of the murderer to answer for the blood of the murdered. The Bible requires the death of murderers. But it can happen that we kill another person by mistake, without malice and without intent. Such people have committed the crime of killing another person, but they are not guilty of murder. The Bible gives a couple of examples of this:

- **“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”** (Deuteronomy 19:5) 就如人与邻舍同入树林砍伐树木, 手拿斧子一砍, 本想砍下树木, 不料, 斧头脱了把, 飞落在邻舍身上, 以致于死, 这人逃到那些城的一座城, 就可以存活,
- **“But if he pushed him suddenly without enmity, or hurled anything on him without lying in wait or used a stone that could cause death, and without seeing him dropped it on him, so that he died, though he was not his enemy and did not seek his harm”** (Numbers 35:22-23)
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Accidents like these are extremely painful providences of God. With God, of course, there are no accidents. All things happen according to the counsel of His will (Ephesians 1:11). Even the Law taught this: **“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.”**¹² 打人以致打死的, 必要把他治死。13 人若不是埋伏着杀人, 乃是神交在他手中, 我就设下一个地方, 他可以往那里逃跑。(Exodus 21:12-13) The Law taught that when accidents happen, God's hand was behind the accident, in complete control. We can't go back and do it

all over again a different way. No, we can only go ahead and face life as it has been forever changed. The way forward for both the slayer and the victim's family was for the slayer to run immediately to the nearest City of Refuge.

⁵Then if the avenger of blood (报血仇的) pursues him, they shall not deliver the slayer (那杀人的) into his hand, because he struck his neighbor unintentionally, but did not hate him beforehand. ⁶And he shall dwell in that city until he stands before the congregation for judgment, and until the death of the one who is high priest in those days. Then the slayer may return and come to his own city and his own house, to the city from which he fled.”

When the slayer came to the city for refuge the priests, elders and all the people of the city were required to protect him against the 'avenger of blood.' (The 'avenger of blood' was the nearest relative of the person who was killed. It was his responsibility to pursue justice on behalf of the deceased 已死亡的人 – life for life.) As soon as possible a trial was held in that city to examine the slayer's claim that the killing was accidental. If the claim was shown to be false, the city was not allowed to give refuge to the murderer. It was not to become a safe haven for murderers! He had to be handed over to the avenger of blood and brought to justice, without mercy. But if the claim was found to be true, the slayer could find long-term protection in the city. If the man was found not guilty of murder, he had to stay in the city of refuge until the High Priest (大祭司) died. Then he was set free and could safely go back to his own home and city.

What a hard thing it can be when people make mistakes that hurt you badly! Though it was not intentional, maybe it was avoidable, and now your life is changed forever – especially if it involves the death of a loved one. When this happens God teaches us that we really must let go of our anger against the one who hurt us. This takes a lot of grace, and a lot of trusting in God who let this happen for some higher reason beyond our understanding. But our God is a merciful God who **knows our frame and remembers we are dust** (Psalm 103:14), and He calls us to show that same mercy to the one who hurt us.

What a great and merciful God and Saviour we have! He is a Refuge for us when things go terribly wrong!

2) Let's take a closer look at why God appointed these Cities of Refuge.

a) The Cities of Refuge were a testimony (见证) to human dignity and justice

The Cities of Refuge were God's testimony to the special dignity of human life. Israel was a light to the nations, and this was one way in which the light of God's glory shone. In our godless culture we argue which should come first – pets or people? – but in Israel God wanted to make clear that human beings are made in the image of God and, therefore, human life, and the *killing* of that life, must be taken very seriously – even when it is an *accidental* killing. Justice must still be followed. The case must still be tried. The avenger of blood must still have his day in court.

Killing a human being without proper warrant (in war, in capital punishment, and in self-defence) is always a crime in God's sight. Even if it is an accidental killing or manslaughter, it is still a very serious matter with serious consequences. Someone's blood had been shed without warrant, and that loss of human life cried out for an answer. Human life is precious in God's sight and very important to Him. God's law trains us to be careful with the life of our neighbor, taking reasonable precautions for their safety when we wield an axe, handle machinery, play hockey, or drive our vehicles. At the same time, we must leave room for God's providence and to trust in Him even when He lets something terrible happen in our life.

In so many societies life is so cheap. Killing is so 'normal' that it is often not investigated by the authorities. But that is not the way it is supposed to be in God's land and God's justice system!

Because blood was shed unintentionally, the slayer was permitted to live. Yet, because blood was shed, the slayer had to remain in the City of Refuge. No ransom could be paid for him to go back home earlier. In another place the LORD commanded: **And you shall accept no ransom for him who has fled to his city of refuge, that he may return to dwell in the land before the death of the high priest.** 那逃到逃城的人，你们不可为他收赎价，使他在大祭司未死以先再来住在本地。(Numbers 35:32)

b) The Cities of Refuge were a testimony to God's mercy

Second, these cities promoted God's mercy. God's justice is not merciless. The blood of the one who was killed was important to the LORD and cried out for an answer, for payment. But so also was the blood of the killer important to God, and if the one who killed did not intend to kill, then we must not snuff out (扼杀) his life in a fit of passion to avenge the loss of life. God sees that not all killing is the same so He shows mercy to the manslayer, and he wants His people to learn to imitate Him in this and show the same mercy.

God opened up a door of mercy for those who took the life of another human being accidentally. He knows our hearts and motives, and cares not only about what happens on the outside but also what lives on the inside of a man. And He says: *When there is an accidental killing, I have provided a place for you to run and hide and find safety from the avenger of blood who wants to kill you. I am a refuge for you when things go terribly wrong! Technically, since you killed the other person, it was your deed, you must be killed, but in wrath I want my people to remember mercy, as I remember mercy when I am angry!*

Without this law, what would happen? The nation would be left to the powers of passion of the avenger of blood. God intended this land to be a place of rest and peace, not ruled by the sinful passions of men, for **the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God.** (James 1:19) Man is by nature unjust(不公义的) and ruled by passions rather than by truth and justice. God provides a door of mercy among a people of little or no mercy. He declares that He is with us when things go well; He also is with you and is a Rock of Refuge for you when things go wrong! God is very good, very holy, and very gracious. You can rest in Him at all times, and in all circumstances.

c) The Cities of Refuge were a testimony to the power of the death of the High Priest

Here, in the city, the manslayer had complete safety. But he must stay here in the city until the death of the High Priest. If the High Priest was getting old, this was fairly easy to accept. But if he was still young, you can imagine that this was quite an ordeal (煎熬). His family would have to come to the city often to visit him. But the main point is this: when human life is taken without a just cause, that blood demands an answer. In the case of accidental death, the death of the High Priest was considered the answer to that loss of life. Instead of the manslayer losing his life to settle the matter, the death of the High Priest settled the matter! The slayer was now totally free because of his death, and, also, the avenger of blood must now put away all his hostility because of his death. The death of the High Priest removed the exile (流放) from the slayer and the enmity from the avenger of blood.

3) Where do we find these Cities of Refuge today?

We know that the High Priest was a picture and prophecy of Jesus Christ, the true High Priest, who died, but rose again and now lives forever in the heavenly city. He is in heaven at the right hand of God, interceding for us (为我们代求). He is an anchor for our souls (我们灵魂的锚), firm and secure. He provides safety and stability when everything is uncertain and in upheaval.

Many speak here of Jesus as the City of Refuge for sinners to run to, those who have committed great crimes, who have murdered, who have sinned greatly against God and against our neighbour. Surely, we all need such a refuge for our lives, a place to put our sin and guilt and get rid of it all. The right place to run is Jesus! You will discover in His cross the only place where God will truly put away all your guilt from you and set you free! Indeed, there is no God like our God who pardons sin and sets us free from the punishment we deserve!

But this passage is actually speaking of the refuge and rest needed by those who have not murdered, and yet have encountered terribly unsettling things in their lives where the sadness does not go away, and the pain goes very deep. Here God is saying: *You need a refuge too! You cannot handle this in your own strength. And I provide a refuge for you. In my Son. He is the city I have given for you to run too, the Rock of Ages, the Safe and Sure Fortress, the Secure Hiding Place for your weak and needy life. In His death and resurrection you find the perfect answer to all the turmoil that has shaken up your life!* One day He will make everything right again. He will raise the dead and make the wounded whole. He says: **Behold, I make everything new!** (Revelation 21:5)

Jesus Christ is our City. He keeps the road to Himself well-maintained and the gates to Jesus are always open. He calls us to come. **Come to me** you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest. (Matthew 11:28) **We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.** (Hebrews 4:15-16)

Let us run to Him for the refuge and encouragement we need in all the troubles of life. (see Hebrews 6:18) Jesus is our Refuge not only when we sin, but also when life takes a wrong turn and we end up in the deep trouble of our own mistakes and accidents. These are heavy trials (试炼) which often lead people to run for false refuges that cannot solve their problems. They will look for pain relief in alcohol, drugs, or even suicide. It can cause minds and hearts to become so overburdened with regret and feelings of guilt that we lose our mental and emotional stability. In such times, the worst thing we can think is that there is no way out, no relief, no help, that God does not see and God does not care.

But God does see, and God does care. He cares enough to provide a City of Refuge for us. So let us run to His City for refuge continually! **God is our refuge and our strength an ever present help in trouble!** (Psalm 46:1)