

The Cities of Refuge.

Joshua 20.

Sunday evening, August 29, 2010.

I. The provision implemented.

- A. This special provision, which was a feature of the Old Covenant life in the promised land, was first communicated to God's people under Moses, and it is recorded for us in Numbers 35:9-34.
- B. The book of Deuteronomy is a repeat of the law God gave to His people. In Deut. 19 :1-13 this law and provision is repeated.
- C. Here in Joshua 20 the provision is finally implemented.

II. The nature of the provision.

- A. The passages cited above teach us that the land is polluted by the shedding of innocent blood.
- B. The only way to cleanse away this pollution was by shedding the blood of him who shed the innocent blood. Numbers 35:33.
- C. To see to it that the shedding of innocent blood would not go unpunished, the nearest of kin to the slain person was designated "the avenger of blood." This means that he was invested with the responsibility to see to it that the perpetrator of shedding innocent blood was brought to justice.
He could either do so himself by tracking down the guilty person and taking his life, or he could have others do it for him, or with him. Either way the land could only be cleansed from the shedding of innocent blood by shedding the blood of the guilty.
- D. There are times however where you may cause the death of another without there being any animosity toward that person.
 1. Numbers 35:22-24 cites the example of someone throwing a stone and accidentally hitting someone so that the person dies.
 2. Deut. 19:5 cites the example of a man cutting down a tree and the ax-head comes off the handle and strikes someone so that the person dies.The key is always the absence of malice.
- E. In such a case the person causing the death of another would flee to one of the cities of refuge, where he would be given sanctuary until it could be determined that he indeed had caused the death of another accidentally. If this was indeed the case he would stay there until the High Priest died, after which he was free to go without fear of reprisals.
- F. Some special provisions of the cities of refuge:
 1. They were strategically located throughout the Promised Land so they could be reached within one day's journey from anywhere in the Promised Land. Three cities were located East of the Jordan River, from the Golan Heights of today's Syria to the land East of the Dead sea of today's Jordan. Three more cities were West of the Jordan River located in the South, Central, and Northern part of Israel.
 2. Their gates were open day or night.
 3. The main roads leading to these cities were well maintained.

4. Clear signs were to be posted along the roads showing the way to the nearest city of refuge.
5. These were cities belonging to the Levites who were in charge of the spiritual welfare of the people. Anyone fleeing to a city of refuge was given protection and provision until his case could be reviewed by a lawful proceeding.
6. If the death he had caused was indeed an accidental one, the city of refuge would continue to give him sanctuary including protection and provision. However his safety was only guaranteed within the boundaries of the city.
7. Once the High Priest died (they were appointed for life) these people were free to go wherever they pleased without fear of any reprisals.

III What does the provision signify?

The entire Old Testament administration was a type and figure of the truth and grace the Messiah would bring into the world. The cities of refuge are no exception. They point us to the refuge that is set up for us in the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ. The New Testament uses language which is to be understood against the backdrop of the Old covenant provision of the cities of refuge:

- A. The letter to the Hebrews was written to Jewish Christians. The letter contains much distinctly Old Covenant terminology and subject matter. The author runs this Old Covenant information through the “Christ Event” and shows its significance in light of the New Covenant.

As such it should not surprise us that we should find “City of Refuge terminology” in the letter to the Hebrews.

We do so in Hebrews 6:18 where we read: “We... who have fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope set before us.”

- B. Consider these Scriptures also as they bear on Christ’s death as the High Priest:
 1. “Having been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him.” Romans 5:9.
 2. “There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus.” Romans 8:1.
 3. Consider the matter of finding safety and refuge in Christ:

“The one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out.” John 6:37.

IV. Some gospel parallels.

- A. The roads to the cities of refuge were to be well maintained. And is not the road to the Lord Jesus Christ a smooth and plain path. Are not any obstacles that we encounter those in our own hearts rather than those in the way?
- B. Road signs pointing to the city were to be prominently displayed, and have not the directions pointing to the Lord Jesus Christ been proclaimed to the ends of the earth?
- C. The gates of the city were never closed, and does not the Lord Jesus Christ ever stand ready to receive those who seek to come to god through Him?
- D. The elders of this city stood ever ready with protection and provision for some needy soul that came running through its gates, and is this not the way the Lord, and His Church are with sinners still?