

THE BELIEVER'S REFUGE: THE INTERSECTION OF GOD'S JUSTICE AND GOD'S MERCY

Joshua 20:1-9

INTRODUCTION: In this lifetime, we all will face trials and tribulations, problems and pain, sin and sickness, disease and death. In Job 14:1, Job captures this reality by indicating that life is short and full of trouble. Without a place of safety to run to and stay in, no one could escape the divine penalty for sin or survive the enemy of our souls who seeks only to steal, kill, and destroy. God, in His justice and in His great mercy, has provided such a place of refuge for those who believe in—and willingly yield to—the lordship of His Son. Jesus is the believer's refuge, and our safety and well-being in this life and the life to come depends wholly upon whether we choose to run to and stay in the only designated safe place – Jesus the Christ.

BACKGROUND: In Chapters 13-21 of The Book of Joshua, we find Joshua leading the distribution of the Promised Land to the twelve tribes. This distribution followed the initial conquering of the land in fulfillment of God's longstanding promises to the patriarchs of Israel (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob). After Joshua grants Caleb his request for Hebron in Chapter 14, the rest of the land is allotted to each tribe as part of their inheritance in Chapters 15-19. God had previously instructed that one tribe—the Levites—were not to receive a dedicated territory like the other tribes because “the Lord, the God of Israel, is their inheritance” (Joshua 13:13). It is important to note that the Levites themselves had been the recipients of God's justice and God's mercy. After Shechem violated their sister Dinah, Levi and his brother Simeon plotted and executed vengeance by killing Shechem and his father, and looting their city (see Genesis 34). In Genesis 49:5-7, we see Jacob cursing Levi and Simeon, and promising to “disperse them in Jacob and scatter them in Israel” (Genesis 49:7). But later we see Moses declaring a blessing upon Levi's descendants: that they should “teach [God's] ordinances to Jacob, and [God's] law to Israel” (Deuteronomy 33:10). Although the Levites were indeed scattered among the other eleven tribes in 48 designated Levitical cities (Numbers 35:1-8), in so doing they were accessible to their fellow Israelites to provide spiritual leadership and priestly oversight. Out of these 48 designated Levitical cities, God had commanded Moses to set aside 6 of these cities as cities of refuge for those who had killed another “accidentally or unintentionally.” In Chapter 20, we find God, through the cities of refuge, demonstrating His justice, His mercy and providing an early glimpse of the eternal refuge He was going to make available to the world.

I. THE CITIES OF REFUGE ARE A PICTURE OF THE JUSTICE OF GOD. THE JUSTICE OF GOD MEANS THAT GOD ALWAYS ACTS IN ALIGNMENT WITH WHAT IS RIGHT, AND THAT HE HIMSELF IS THE ULTIMATE STANDARD OF WHAT IS RIGHT.

- A.** God is both a righteous lawgiver and a righteous judge. (See Genesis 1:28, Genesis 2:16-17; Genesis 3:14-19, 23-24; Romans 5:12; Genesis 6:5; 1 Peter 3:20; 2 Peter 2:5; Genesis 1:26; Exodus 20:13; Genesis 9:6; Exodus 21:12; Leviticus 24:17; Numbers 35:30; Matthew 5:21-22)
- B.** As Jesus revealed in the Sermon on the Mount, God does not look merely at the actions we either commit or fail to commit; He also looks at the intentions of our hearts. God examines our hearts and commands us to diligently protect our hearts. (1 Samuel 16:7; Proverbs 4:23)
- C.** Although God, in love, punishes all wrongdoing, a feature of God's justice is that His judgments take into account our intentions as well as our actions. (See Joshua 20:3; Numbers 35:22-23; Deuteronomy 19:5; Numbers 35:16-21; Exodus 21:13; Deuteronomy 4:41-42; Deuteronomy 19:11-12; Joshua 20:6; Numbers 35:33-34; Joshua 20:5; Deuteronomy 19:5-7, 21; Numbers 35:26-28; Joshua 20:4,6, 9)

II. THE CITIES OF REFUGE ARE A PICTURE OF THE MERCY OF GOD. THE MERCY OF GOD MEANS THAT GOD, BECAUSE HE ALONE IS TRULY GOOD, SHOWS KINDNESS AND GOODNESS TO THOSE WHO ARE IN DISTRESS AND SINCERELY CALL UPON HIM FOR HELP.

- A. God is merciful. When we call on Him in our distress with broken and contrite hearts, He is willing to spare us from receiving the full measure of punishment that our actions deserve. (2 Peter 3:9, 2 Samuel 24:14; Psalm 51:17; Matthew 9:36)
- B. Even when we sin by committing an act that accidentally or unintentionally violates God’s moral law, we still deserve the penalty of death—eternal separation from God—because the wages of sin are death. (Romans 6:23)
- C. He is merciful, God offers refuge from receiving the full measure of punishment that we deserve. (See Joshua 20:2; Deuteronomy 19:3)

III. THE CITIES OF REFUGE ARE A PICTURE OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST. JESUS CHRIST IS THE BELIEVER’S REFUGE. HE ALONE SITS AT THE INTERSECTION OF GOD’S JUSTICE AND GOD’S MERCY, AND PROVIDES THE ONLY SAFE REFUGE FROM DEATH, THE ENEMY OF OUR SOUL, AND THE COMING JUDGMENT.

- A. The Lord God has many attributes, including being just and merciful.
- B. God—in His mercy—loved the world enough to send His only Son, Jesus the Christ, to take on the penalty for our sins so that whoever believed in Jesus would not perish but have everlasting life. (John 3:16)
- C. In this passage about the cities of refuge, God is demonstrating how He is both wholly just and wholly merciful. You can consider the entire chapter to be a picture (albeit not a perfect parallel) of Jesus as the believer’s refuge. (See 1 Peter 1:18-19; Hebrews 6:18-20; Hebrews 4:14-16; Ecclesiastes 12:14; Acts 17:31; Revelation 20:12-15)
- D. While the cities of refuge offer many similarities to Jesus as our refuge, there is an important difference between the picture we see in the cities of refuge and what the Bible reveals about Jesus.
- E. Finally, like the Levites, we must labor to make the way to Christ accessible for everyone. (See Matthew 23:4, 13; Matthew 9:37; 1 Corinthians 3:6-7)

EACH PERSON HAS A CHOICE TO MAKE ABOUT THE RISKS OF LIVING OUTSIDE OF THE BELIEVER’S REFUGE. GOD, IN HIS LOVE, ALLOWS US TO CHOOSE OUR CHOICES, BUT ONLY HE DETERMINES THE CONSEQUENCES. DO YOU LOVE GOD AND VALUE THE GIFT OF LIFE ENOUGH TO FLEE TO JESUS, TO LIVE IN HIM, AND TO HELP OTHERS TO DO THE SAME?