

Title: The 'Place of Grace' - Joshua 20

Purpose: To consider the Cities of Refuge and understand their operation, their similarities to Christ's work and also how they apply to the way our churches look and work.

INTRODUCTION

Loose ends

I think it can be one of those NICE - maybe REWARDING feelings in life when you are able to tie up LOOSE ENDS. It's easy to do the 80% of a job BUT SOMEHOW dotting the i's and crossing the t's of the last 20% can be much more ELUSIVE.

We have in Newbury a charity that goes by the name of LOOSE ENDS because it caters for people who probably feel that they are themselves society's LOOSE ENDS. These are the homeless whose lives seem somehow "on hold" - they are those who seek some place of refuge.

Well we'll come back to this idea of loose ends in a bit.

Last week - Joshua 13-19

Last week we went through the 7 chapters from chapter 13 thru to 19 where the land of Canaan is divided up between the various tribes.

And the final words of the final verse of chapter 19 says:

(Joshua 19 verse 51b) "And so they finished dividing the land."

Scrolling on two chapters to chapter 21 and the concluding 3 verses we read these similarly "**finalising words**":

(Joshua 21 verses 43-45) "So the LORD gave Israel all the land he had sworn to give their forefathers, and they took possession of it and settled there. The LORD gave them rest on every side, just as he had sworn to their forefathers. Not one of their enemies withstood them; the LORD handed all their enemies over to them. Not one of all the LORD's good promises to the house of Israel failed; every one was fulfilled."

And it would not be hard to think that those verses at the end of chapter 21 would fit very nicely and neatly on the end of chapter 19. **And so we sense that there are in God's eyes some "LOOSE ENDS" that need tying off.**

So a question that we do well to ask is:

Q. What does God feel is **still outstanding**, that is **still necessary** - before the people can truly say that everything is now in place?

And the answer seems to have **everything to do with the LEVITES** since they, at one level or another the common factor in **BOTH** chapter 20 and chapter 21.

God's provision of grace

You see all along in the book of Joshua we see God's grace being dispensed in various different ways:

- **WE SEE VARIOUS WAYS** - in which God's **POWERFUL GRACE** is clearly seen power to cross the Jordan on dry ground.
power enough to make the walls of Jericho to fall down.
power sufficient for the whole Canaanite presence to be subdued - (whether in the central region, whether in the South or whether in the North).
- **WE SEE VARIOUS WAYS** - in which God's **SAVING GRACE** comes to those who desire to change sides: people like Rahab the prostitute and also the Gibeonites (even though they - like Rahab - were not averse to using deception to achieve their end).

We see the fullness of that grace when we follow how things turned out for Rahab and the Gibeonites when we see how they became embedded amongst the Jews and how God brought them close to Himself - the Gibeonites were tabernacle (and later temple) attendants - and Rahab became part of the family line of the Messiah Himself.

- **AND WE ALSO SEE WAYS** - here in **chapter 20&21** where God's (what I'll call) **MERCIFUL GRACE** comes to bear on those that don't particularly deserve it.

And this we see in relation to the tribe of Levi.

Still more grace

Simeon and Levi were Jacob's second and third born and together they acted ruthlessly and took revenge on the Shechemites in relation to the rape of their sister Dinah.

Because of this Jacob before he dies has this to say by way of prophesy:

Genesis 49 verses 5-7 "Simeon and Levi are brothers— their swords are weapons of violence. Let me not enter their council, let me not join their assembly, for they have killed men in their anger and hamstrung oxen as they pleased. Cursed be their anger, so fierce, and their fury, so cruel! **I will scatter them in Jacob and disperse them in Israel.**"

For Simeon they become absorbed into Judah - it is almost as though they don't exist as a separate identity like all the other tribes AND YET - and here comes the gracious aspect - they are absorbed into:

- that tribe that is **close to God's heart**
- that tribe is where God will **choose to put his name**
- and the tribe out of **which the Messiah will come - the tribe of Judah**

Q. So what about the tribe of Levi - the Levites?

Well just as God said through the mouth of Jacob as he blessed the tribes - they do get scattered right throughout the land and they get no inheritance of their own like the other tribes - instead they get given pastureland in 48 cities.

Q. So where is the MERCIFUL GRACE for the Levites?

Well:

- **FIRSTLY** - they act as a permanent sign and reminder to everyone else that **ALTHOUGH** we are **SETTLED NOW IN THE LAND** - this is ***NOT*** our **permanent home**.

They helped people to remember that they needed to live like TRAVELLERS PASSING THROUGH. To live like those who held the things of this world with AN OPEN HAND.

- **SECONDLY** - there is MERCIFUL GRACE because God takes into account an occasion when the Levites actually do well.

We should never think that God only sees when we fail and mess up.

The occasion is part of that sad story of the Golden Calf when Moses comes down the mountain with the 10 commandments and discovers that the people have gone wild and have made a gold idol to worship.

And Moses says: (Exodus 32 verses 26-29)

“Whoever is for the LORD, come to me.” And all the Levites rallied to him. Then he said to them, “This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: ‘Each man strap a sword to his side. Go back and forth through the camp from one end to the other, each killing his brother and friend and neighbour.’ ” The Levites did as Moses commanded, and that day about three thousand of the people died. Then Moses said, “You have been set apart to the LORD today, for you were against your own sons and brothers, and he has blessed you this day.”

- **THIRDLY** - in the very area where the Levites went so very wrong in their murderous violence - the LORD allows them now to become involved in the business of protection.

He makes it such that the 6 cities of refuge are all cities where the Levites live and so of necessity the Levites are going to be a major factor, a major force for good in seeing that justice is done and seen to be done.

So all-in-all, if you didn't know - the God of the Bible is thoroughly a God of POWERFUL GRACE, SAVING GRACE and yes MERCIFUL GRACE.

This morning

This morning I want to concentrate on Joshua chapter 20 and this chapter is all to do with the CITIES OF REFUGE.

- **NOW** - it is a fact that Israel **had an ARMY**
- **BUT** - it is also a fact that Israel did ***not* have a POLICE FORCE**

And God knows that the people need:

- ***not just* a LAND TO LIVE IN *but also* a LAW TO LIVE BY**

Our structure

Now I have just 3 simple headings this morning which are:

- 1) The Bible & the Cities of Refuge
- 2) Christ Jesus & the Cities of Refuge - and then finally (pressing it somewhat closer to home)
- 3) Our Church & the Cities of Refuge

1] The Bible & the Cities of Refuge

Q. So what are **CITIES OF REFUGE** all about?

Well [Joshua 20 verse 3](#) gives us what's at the heart of it:

[\(Joshua 20 verse 3\)](#) "...anyone who kills a person **accidentally** and **unintentionally** may flee there and find protection from the **avenger of blood.**"

Throughout Joshua and throughout the many years that the military campaigns had been raging - there has been quite a wholesale **THEME OF DEATH** and it is worth being quite clear about this - it is:

- the death of God's enemies
- on account of their sin
- at the express command of God

But now it is very important for the people of God to understand that life has not now suddenly become cheap.

If we were looking at these CITIES OF REFUGE and we only had [Joshua chapter 20](#) - we would probably find the details a little bit lacking and overly sketchy given the seriousness of the subject - HOWEVER, it is a subject which has roots that go back through all of the books of Moses from Genesis right through to Deuteronomy:

- **IN GENESIS** - in Noah's day, we read (Genesis 9 verses 6&7) "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man."

And this is quite a BASELINE VERSE as we get to understand that one of the reasons why LIFE IS SACROSANT is because we are made in the image of God.

- **IN EXODUS** - right after the giving of the 10 commandments, we read this:

(Exodus 21 verses 12-14) "Anyone who strikes a man and kills him shall surely be put to death. However, if he does not do it **intentionally**, but God lets it happen, **he is to flee to a place I will designate**. But if a man schemes and kills another man deliberately, take him away from my altar and put him to death."

It is interesting that God should give this first notification of the cities of refuge through this man Moses. If you remember back to his own past - he was, in fact, himself a MURDERER - he killed the Egyptian and then fled.

The other interesting thing about this verse, (and maybe you noticed this), is that God has a PERMISSIVE WILL. It said: "if he does not do it intentionally, BUT GOD LETS IT HAPPEN...".

It is always a question that we tend to ask when something bad happens - we say:

Q. Why did God not stop this? And I think in many cases we will not fully know. Perhaps when we look back some years after the event we might be able to trace out some of the things that God has done in and through an unhappy event - BUT sometimes God does not give us insight.

As Scripture says (Deuteronomy 29 verse 29) "The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law."

BUT if you want the fullest details regarding these cities of refuge and those who unwittingly or knowing kill someone then you can go to either Numbers 35 or Deuteronomy 19.

Now without reading all those sections, which would make things a little lengthy, let me just blend or "marry" these passages together and give you the main aspects:

- **FIRSTLY** - these cities were **meant for manslayers AND *NOT* for murderers.**

All of these passages seek to draw a clear distinction between those who kill intentionally and those who kill accidentally.

This is the distinction between MURDER and what we nowadays call MANSLAUGHTER.

These places of REFUGE or ASYLUM - were there to provide BOTH **protection against revenge killing AND AT THE SAME TIME, the preservation of true justice.**

- **SECONDLY** - these cities were **fully accessible.**

In total there were 6 cities - 3 of them were allocated by Moses in the Transjordan on the East side of the Jordan River and to match this there were 3 allocated by Joshua in the Land of Canaan.

And if you were to look at these on a map you would quickly realise that they are chosen so that wherever you live you will be able to get to a city of refuge without too much difficulty.

In Deuteronomy 19 we learn that it is not enough merely to set aside these cities - they also have to build roads to them.

Apparently from non-biblical sources we learn a few extra details:

- these special roads were repaired every spring after the rains and the bad weather of the winter (even we do the same today)
- not only this but they had to build extra bridges so that those who were fleeing from the avenger of blood would not have to run down into ravines but could have unfettered access to these cities without any delay. It's rather like God built a special bus lane and put up "no stopping" signs along the road.
- talking about signs - apparently they did put up special signs which simply had the word REFUGE on them wherever there were crossroad - so that the fleeing man might not lose his bearings.
- one more thing was that these cities of refuge - they would never lock their doors - so that one seeking refuge would not find him or herself being kept knocking at 3am seeking access.

One other aspect of the accessibility of these cities is the fact that they were **made available to ALL - BOTH** to the **ISRAELITE** and also to those who were **STRANGERS** living amongst the Israelites.

- **THIRDLY** - **justice was at the heart of this provision.** Having a place of refuge meant that hasty revenge would not have a chance to be exacted.

They would take on the role of getting a proper assembly together where the case could be properly heard and witnesses brought.

If the man or woman was found guilty then they would be handed over to the avenger of blood for him to

execute capital punishment.

Q. Who was this avenger of blood? Well he would be a member of the victims family.

It is interesting that judgment is not privatized to some other external body AND BY WAY OF APPLICATION it does remind us that we all have a responsibility to one another to keep each other ACCOUNTABLE.

If we see a brother or sister going astray then we should go and see that one and seek, with gentleness and humility, to put that person back on track. (See Galatians 6 if you want to check out the details).

- **FOURTHLY** - justice was done **but it was in no way "CHEAP JUSTICE"**.

If the man was found to be innocent of pre-meditated murder then that was not the end of things. You see blood had been shed and that was always a serious matter.

There was limitation and cost still that was a part of things. The man would now live in the city of refuge if he wanted to enjoy the protection that it afforded.

However he could only leave that city to return home once the High Priest had died.

Well that enough for the basic Bible teaching about these cities of refuge - I want now to start broadening it out a bit and go onto #2 now - which is:

2] Christ Jesus & the Cities of Refuge

Now I want to be clear that the CITIES OF REFUGE are ***not*** what we would call a **direct type, a direct pattern of Christ**.

HOWEVER, that being said, I think it fair to say that **when we look at the CITIES OF REFUGE and Christ we can see some striking similarities**.

Let work through them and I think you will be that there is much GRACE to be distilled out of this chapter here in Joshua 20:

- **FIRST OF ALL - Christ** - like the cities of refuge, is ONE WHO IS EASY TO REACH, He does not hide Himself or play "Hide and Seek!".

Instead Jesus says: "ASK and you shall receive, SEEK and you shall find, KNOCK and the door will be opened to you."

It is virtually the Bible's final word: Revelation 22 verse 17 " The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come!' And let him who hears say, 'Come!' Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life."

- **SECOND - CHRIST** is OPEN TO ALL: Jew & Gentile, Male and Female, Slave & Free (perhaps we should translate that to Rich & Poor OR Employed & Unemployed OR Manager & Worker etc. etc.).

- **THIRD - CHRIST** is *not only* open to all-comers - but is **OPEN AT ALL HOURS**.

It is a comfort to know that we **do not need to have a specific appointment** during office hours when Christ will receive us.

You get the impression from Scripture that Christ is just longing to welcome us in: "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me."

- **FOURTH - CHRIST** is **A FULLY SUFFICIENT REFUGE**.

Once the person seeking refuge was taken in by the people they were safe. They were no longer isolated, alone and vulnerable to sudden attack.

When we come to Christ - we are not merely legally protected from the wrath of God, we are, at a positive level given the beautiful robes of Christ's righteousness. We are granted the Spirit of Christ to indwell us and empower us. You can't get much better than that. Grace upon grace is showered, is lavished upon the believer!

- **FIFTHLY - IT IS A CASE OF A LIFE FOR A LIFE**.

You probably noticed that things do not come full circle UNTIL the death of the High Priest. At that point the person is finally and fully released from the blood-guilt and can go home.

Christ is our High Priest and as He dies we find the fullness of release from all our guilt for which we ourselves could not atone.

- **ONE LAST SIMILARITY (I suppose by way of completeness) - IF WE DO NOT FLEE TO CHRIST, THEN THERE IS NO PROTECTION**.

It was no small thing that the life of a clan member be taken. The wholeness of the clan had been affected and it was therefore necessary that there be some righting of that wrong for equilibrium to be restored.

Outside of Christ there could be no rest, there could be no asylum anywhere - the truth is that one day judgment will be served - it is only a matter of time.

All feelings of security, outside of Christ, are feelings of pseudo-security.

As the Bible would say: **"Peace! Peace! When there is no peace!!"**

The Bible & the Cities of Refuge, Christ Jesus & the Cities of Refuge - LAST - but certainly NOT LEAST - #3:

3] The Church & the Cities of Refuge

Now if you feel that the Cities of Refuge are all very well and good BUT this is the 21st Century - well let me put a little meat on the bones and help us to see some of the TRAITS of these Cities of Refuge that very directly should apply to our churches.

Let me briefly give you 4 things with which we will end:

- **No. #1 - Q. When people come to the gate of our church (that is the front door) and step in for the first time, would they quickly know that this IS - A PLACE OF REFUGE, A PLACE OF RECEPTION, A PLACE OF GRACE?**

You see the Cities of Refuge were setup specifically with this kind of reception in mind.

People would arrive having had their world suddenly turned upside down and they would know a reception. After a preliminary hearing, where the elders of the city would establish that the man was not an obvious murderer, then he would be given a house to live in and provided what he needed to live.

I wonder if our churches send out the message in BRIGHT NEON LIGHTS - "YOU REALLY ARE WELCOME HERE" - "WE REALLY OUR GLAD THAT YOU HAVE COME" - "YES - WE REALLY WOULD LIKE TO KNOW YOU and be a BLESSING".

Q. When people think about our church - do people RUN TO US or do they want to RUN FROM US?

- **No. #2 - Q. As a church do we accept the COST?**

Q. When Joshua announced the 3 names of the cities of refuge in the Land of Canaan - I wonder whether those cities were delighted or dismayed?

You see it was going to cost them. They would have to take in strangers, people who were not like them, people who were not in their tribal groupings, people who had in various ways messed up (no not intentionally - but perhaps they might have been a bit wiser the way they were doing things).

They were going to have to provide accommodation - and that would not be for a month or two, it could be for 10 or 20 years!!

They would have to provide work and a means that they could come to support themselves. There was no possibility of keeping these people at arms length. They would have to work side-by-side with them in the fields, in their trades etc.

Q. So are you willing to pay the cost? Time to be with someone and just let them talk. Sharing your resources with them, perhaps they come with nothing and you need to help "set them up". Maybe they don't come with the skills that you have BUT you are willing to advise, you are willing to teach, even train them up.

- **No. #3 - Q. Do we as a church have a SAFE CHURCH mentality? Q. Do we fit the REFUGE model?**

Q. What do I mean? Well it is a bit like that time that a sinful woman anointed Jesus and kissed his feet - and Jesus explained that "she loved much because she had been forgiven much."

OR, if you need another place, remember what the apostle Peter said in [2 Peter 1](#) in relation those who live ineffective and unproductive lives in Christ and he tells us how that can happen:

[Verse 9](#) he "has forgotten that he has been cleansed from his past sins."

We will be a CHURCH OF REFUGE - a PLACE OF GRACE - IF we remember that all of us have a past that we are

not proud of, that when we first came to the Lord Jesus Christ we came WARTS AND ALL!!

- **No. #4 - Q. As a church do we give the GOD-TREATMENT?**

God loves MERCY.

Micah 6 verse 8 "He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you?

To **act justly** and to **LOVE MERCY** and to **walk humbly** with your God."

Perhaps WE love JUSTICE and not MERCY - well we should keep in mind James 2 verse 12 (GNB):

"Speak and act as people who will be judged by the law that sets us free. For God will not show mercy when he judges the person who has not been merciful; but **MERCY TRIUMPHS OVER JUDGMENT.**"

Q. What does MERCY mean? It means graciously *NOT GETTING* what we do deserve!

Q. What does MERCY mean in practice? It means giving one another SLACK, it means giving each other BREAKS when we mess things up. It means we are actively preferring GENEROSITY to JUDGMENT and that is the heart of God, that is what He has done for us if we are in Christ, if we have found in Him our permanent City of Refuge.

CONCLUSION

Let us praise God that He considered this aspect of REFUGE a NECESSARY "LOOSE END".

Let us pray that our church truly has that sweet & immediate aroma of a beautiful PLACE OF GRACE.

To God's glory - AMEN