

Hymns: 1 A Mighty Fortress is Our God
 55 Redeemed, How I Love to Proclaim It 56 Praise Him! Praise Him!

Scripture: Psalm 9:1-10; Psalm 46; Psalm 91

Big idea: God is our refuge.

Our scripture text for today is: **Joshua 20:1-9**

Introduction

You may have heard the news from last week that in Memphis, Tennessee a man was brutally beaten to death by five police officers. On January 7th, the victim, Tyre Nichols was driving in a Memphis neighborhood. He was pulled over by Memphis police for alleged reckless driving according to officials. An altercation occurred. Pepper spray was used by police. Nichols ran and temporarily escaped. As the police attempted to recapture him, he shouted for his mom. The police caught him, restrained him, and beat him. Three days later, Nichols died in the hospital.

News like this grieves us as we consider the depravity of man, the frequent and capricious injustice of our government, and the rampant disregard in our society for human life itself.

In our text for today we will consider our the LORD's direction concerning human life and what provisions He made to protect the innocent from unwarranted vengeance. We are in our study of the book of Joshua. You may recall from last time, Joshua completed the division of the Promised Land and made it formal at their new home base at Shiloh:

Joshua 19

*[51] These are the inheritances which Eleazar the priest,
 and Joshua the son of Nun,
 and the heads of the fathers of the tribes of the children of Israel,
 divided for an inheritance by lot in Shiloh before the LORD,
 at the door of the tabernacle of the congregation.
 So they made an end of dividing the country.*

Our text for today picks up there.

Joshua 20

*[1] The LORD also sp[o]ke unto Joshua, saying,
 [2] Speak to the children of Israel, saying,
 Appoint out for you **cities of refuge**, whereof I sp[o]ke unto you by the hand of Moses:*

This refers back to instructions given to Moses recorded in Numbers 35. We will review that chapter in a few minutes.

*[3] That the slayer that kill[s] any person unaware[] and unwittingly may flee th[ere]:
 and they shall be your **refuge** from the **avenger of blood** (gä'al').*

The avenger of blood would be someone close to the victim who was killed. He had the right and, as we shall see, moral obligation to seek vengeance in the case of a murder. Do you remember Boaz in the book of Ruth? He was called the kinsman redeemer of Ruth. He purchased her to redeem Ruth as his wife. That is the exact same Hebrew word *gā·al'*.

[4] And when he that [] flee[s] unto one of those cities shall stand at the ent[rance] of the gate of the city, and shall declare his cause in the ears of the elders of that city, they shall take him into the city unto them, and give him a place, that he may dwell among them.

*[5] And if the **avenger of blood** (*gā·al'*) pursue[s] after him, then they shall **not** deliver **the slayer** up into his hand; because he smote his neighbour **unwittingly**, and **hated him not beforetime**.*

[6] And he shall dwell in that city, until he stand before the congregation for judgment,

that is, until he has a formal trial for his case.

*and until **the death of the high priest** that shall be in those days:*

Notice that rather strange exception inserted for a slayer waiting in a city of refuge.

then shall the slayer return, and come unto his own city, and unto his own house, unto the city from whence he fled.

Once the high priest dies, he's free to return to his home and live a normal life again.

Before we proceed, let's briefly review the LORD's direction concerning human life. You may recall the first murder occurred in the first family. Cain slew his brother Abel.

Genesis 4

Adam and Eve had two sons: Cain and Abel.

[2] ... And Abel was a keeper of sheep, but Cain was a tiller of the ground.

Cain brought produce as an offering to the LORD.

Abel brought the **first** and **best** of his flock. Note the distinction in quality.

[4] And the LORD had respect unto Abel and to his offering:

*[5] But unto Cain and to his offering he had **not** respect.
And Cain was very wroth, and his countenance fell.*

*[8] And Cain talked with Abel his brother;
and it came to pass, when they were in the field,
that Cain rose up against Abel his brother, and **slew him**.*

(the first murder)

*[9] And the LORD said unto Cain, Where is Abel thy brother?
And he said, I know not: Am I my brother's keeper?*

Notice the LORD gave Cain an opportunity to confess and repent. Instead, he evaded the question and **talked back** to the Almighty God.

*[10] And he [that is, the LORD] said, What hast thou done?
the voice of thy brother's **blood** crieth unto me from the ground.*

Here comes the LORD's judgment on Cain.

*[11] And now art thou **cursed** from the earth,
which hath opened her mouth to receive thy brother's **blood** from thy hand;
[12] When thou tillest the ground,
it shall **not** henceforth yield unto thee her strength;
a fugitive and a vagabond shalt thou be in the earth.*

Notice in this second dispensation (called Conscience) the penalty for this first murder was threefold:

1. Banishment,
2. Difficulty farming,
3. A life of wandering.

Then after the flood, as the Dispensation of Human Government was dawning, the LORD made massive changes in human diet and human / animal interaction. He said:

Genesis 9

*[5] And surely **your blood** of your lives will I require;
at the hand of every beast will I require it,*

This applies even if an animal kills a man.

*and at the hand of man;
at the hand of every man's brother will I require the life of man.*

*[6] Whoso[ever] shed[s] **man's blood**,
by man shall **his blood** be shed:*

Why?

for in the image of God made he man.

So there's the reason for capital punishment. God Himself prescribed it because the murderer is ending the life a person made in the image of God.

Then in the Dispensation of Law in the sixth commandment we have the following:
Exodus 20

[13] Thou shalt not kill.

Here, the word for *kill* is often misconstrued to mean any killing of humans. Of course, the word clearly means *murder*. Now, let's look at Numbers chapter 35 for a bit more detail on this topic:

Numbers 35

[9] And the LORD sp[o]ke unto Moses, saying,

Keep in mind, we're looking back before our present time of the book of Joshua to the time when Moses was the leader.

[10] Speak unto the children of Israel, and say unto them, When ye be come over Jordan into the land of Canaan;

Joshua did that.

*[11] Then ye shall appoint you cities to be **cities of refuge** for you; that the slayer may flee th[ere], which **kill[s] any person at unawares.***

Unintentional homicide

*[12] And they shall be unto you cities for **refuge** from the **avenger**; that the **manslayer** die not, until he stand before the congregation in judgment.*

[13] And of these cities which ye shall give six cities shall ye have for refuge.

[14] Ye shall give three cities on this side Jordan,

They had not crossed the Jordan yet, so *this side* refers to the east side of Jordan and outside the Promised Land.

and three cities shall ye give in the land of Canaan, which shall be cities of refuge.

Three cities will be in the Promised Land on the west side of Jordan.

*[15] These six cities shall be a refuge, ...
for the children of Israel,
and for the stranger,
and for the sojourner among them:
that every one that kill[s] any person **unawares** may flee th[ere].*

Notice this law applied to the children of Israel as well as others who were not Israelites but were living in the Promised Land. That's a nice idea isn't it?
Having the laws applying equally to all?

This instruction proceeds to describe two broad categories of homicide with penalties:

Willful homicide (murder)

*[16] And if he [the murderer] smite him [the victim] with an **instrument of iron**, so that he die, he is a murderer: the murderer shall surely be put to death.*

The next two verses repeat this for **throwing a stone** or using a **weapon of wood**. The weapon is immaterial. What matters is the motive and result.

*[19] The **revenger of blood himself shall slay the murderer**:
when he meet[s] him [] he shall slay him.*

The executioner is prescribed as a person dear to the victim.

The passage next cites:

1. Hatred
2. Lying in wait
3. Enmity

as examples of actions and motives associated with murder
and uses the **absence** those same examples to conclude that the death was **not** a murder.

Unintentional homicide

*[24] Then the congregation shall judge between the **slayer** and the **revenger of blood** according to these judgments:*

*[25] And the congregation shall deliver the **slayer** out of the hand of the **revenger of blood**,
and the congregation shall restore him to the city of his refuge, wh[ere] he [] fled:
and he shall abide in it unto the death of the high priest....*

Now here comes the caveat:

*[26] But if the **slayer** shall at any time come [outside] the border of the **city of his refuge**, wh[ere] he [] fled;*

*[27] And the **revenger of blood** find him [outside] the borders of [his] **city of [] refuge**, and the **revenger of blood** kill[s] the **slayer**; he shall **not** be guilty of **blood**:*

Why?

*[28] Because he (the slayer) should have **remained** in the **city of his refuge** until the death of the high priest:*

*but after the death of the high priest the **slayer** shall return into the land of his possession.*

The passage goes on to require two witnesses to convict someone of murder, repeat the law of a death penalty for murder, and give the city of refuge remedy for unintentional homicide.

[33] So ye shall not pollute the land wherein ye are:

Why?

*for **blood** [] defile[s] the land:*

*and the land cannot be cleansed of the **blood** that is shed therein, [except] by the **blood** of him that shed it.*

That very clear statement not only supports capital punishment, it **mandates** it.

Now returning to our passage in Joshua 20, the scripture enumerates the locations given as cities of refuge. The first group was on the west side of the Jordan River in the Promised Land:

*[7] And they appointed
Kedesh in Galilee in mount Naphtali,*

This is on the southwestern side of the Sea of Galilee not far from Tiberius.

and Shechem in mount Ephraim,

Shechem is in the mountains to the west of the Jordan River about half-way between the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea.

and Kirjath-arba, which is Hebron, in the mountain of Judah.

Hebron is about 20 miles south of Jerusalem also in the mountains.

The next group of cities of refuge were on the east side of the Jordan River and outside the Promised

Land:

*[8] And on the other side Jordan by Jericho eastward,
they assigned Bezer in the wilderness upon the plain out of the tribe of Reuben,*

Bezer is located about 15 miles east of where the Jordan River empties into the Dead Sea.

and Ramoth in Gilead out of the tribe of Gad,

Ramoth was about 40 miles east of the Jordan River and 25 miles south of the Sea of Galilee

and Golan in Bashan out of the tribe of Manasseh.

Golan is about 20 miles east of the Sea of Galilee.

*[9] These were the cities appointed for all the children of Israel,
and for the **stranger** that sojourn[s] among them,
that whosoever kill[s] any person [] unaware[] might flee th[ere],
and not die by the hand of the **avenger of blood** (gä·al'),
until he stood before the congregation.*

Application

Today, we have been considering taking refuge. We've all heard the expression "Stop the world, I want to get off." You may have also heard of wealthy people building elaborate underground bomb shelters, setting up an estate to fleeing to in Argentina, posturing to travel to the moon or mars, or even making arrangements for freezing their brains at death to return in a future time when medical science has advanced to the point it can reverse aging and reconstruct a youthful body. Of course, these schemes cannot solve the problem that faces man. The fallen, flawed human nature will still be there until the LORD alone transforms it.

In our passage today, we read that the condition that frees the one bound to the city of refuge was the death of the high priest. In Hebrews chapter 4 we read:

*[14] Seeing then that we have a **great high priest**, that is passed into the heavens, **Jesus the Son of God**, let us hold fast our profession.*

Clearly, the LORD gave this law to foreshadow that our ultimate refuge from sin, corruption, and death is found in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus the Son of God. May we look to Him as our refuge in our every time of need.

Benediction

*The LORD bless thee, and **keep** thee:*

*The LORD make his face **shine** upon thee, and be gracious unto thee:*

The LORD lift up his countenance upon thee, and give thee peace. (Numbers 6:24-26)

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