Thought For The Week

Articles: *Cities of Refuge* - 300 words, 1200 words

Cities of Refuge

From John's sermon on November 8, 2026

After forty years of wandering in the wilderness, the people of Israel stood on the verge of the Promised Land. God had led them by the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. Now special instructions were given before they crossed the Jordan. Each tribe was to receive a designated portion of the land—except the Levites. The Levites had a distinct calling. They were set apart for service at the tabernacle (and later the temple). Instead of a contiguous territory, they were given forty-eight cities scattered throughout the inheritance of the other tribes, including the common land surrounding those cities (Numbers 35:1–8).

Among those forty-eight cities, God commanded that six be designated as **cities of refuge**.

The Purpose of the Cities of Refuge

The Lord spoke to Moses:

> "Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them: 'When you cross the Jordan into the land of Canaan, then you shall appoint cities to be cities of refuge for you, that the manslayer who kills any person accidentally may flee there. They shall be cities of refuge for you from the avenger, that the manslayer may not die until he stands before the congregation in judgment.'"
>
> — Numbers 35:9–12 NKJV

This was not a system of vigilante justice. Accidental killings happen. Intentional murders also happen. God established a process that included a trial before the congregation. The cities of refuge provided temporary protection from the **avenger of blood**—typically a family member of the deceased who sought to avenge the death—until the facts could be examined.

Of the six cities, three were to be appointed on the east side of the Jordan and three on the west side in the land of Canaan (Numbers 35:13–14). Why three on each side? The answer is found in Numbers 32. The tribes of Reuben, Gad, and the half-tribe of Manasseh had already requested and received land east of the Jordan—the former kingdoms of Sihon king of the Amorites and Og king of Bashan. Moses granted their request on the condition that their fighting men still cross the river and help the other tribes possess Canaan. Thus the people of God would be settled on both sides of the Jordan, and cities of refuge were needed on both sides.

Joshua 20:7–8 later names the six cities:

- **East of the Jordan**: Bezer (Reuben), Ramoth in Gilead (Gad), and Golan in Bashan (Manasseh).
- **West of the Jordan**: Kedesh in the mountains of Naphtali, Shechem in the mountains of Ephraim, and Hebron (Kirjath Arba) in the mountains of Judah.

These cities were not easily accessible. They were located in wilderness, mountains, or high places. Reaching one required real effort. Yet if someone was being pursued by the avenger of blood, the difficulty of the journey was worth it. Life was at stake.

Accidental Killing versus Murder

God did not leave the distinction between accidental and intentional killing vague. Numbers 35 carefully defines the difference.

If a person struck another with an iron implement, or with a stone in the hand capable of causing death, or with a wooden weapon capable of causing death, and the victim died, the act was murder. The murderer was to be put to death, and the avenger of blood was authorized to carry out that sentence when he met him (Numbers 35:16–19).

The same applied if the killing was motivated by hatred or enmity—if the offender pushed the victim out of hatred, or lay in wait and hurled something at him, or struck him in enmity (Numbers 35:20–21).

By contrast, if the death was truly accidental—if the offender pushed someone suddenly without enmity, or threw an object without lying in wait, or used a stone that could kill without seeing the person and without seeking his harm—then the congregation was to judge between the manslayer and the avenger of blood according to these judgments (Numbers 35:22–24).

The manslayer was not declared innocent. Unintentional sin is still sin. “The wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23). The killer remained guilty. What the city of refuge provided was protection from the immediate consequences of that guilt, under specific conditions established by God.

Until the Death of the High Priest

The protection was not permanent in itself. Numbers 35:25 states:

> “So the congregation shall deliver the manslayer from the hand of the avenger of blood, and the congregation shall return him to the city of refuge where he had fled, and he shall remain there until the death of the high priest who was anointed with the holy oil.”
>
> — Numbers 35:25 NKJV

If the manslayer left the city before the high priest’s death and the avenger found him, the avenger could kill him without being guilty of blood. The manslayer was required to remain under the protection God had designed until that specific event occurred. Only after the death of the high priest who had been anointed with the holy oil could the manslayer return to the land of his

possession (Numbers 35:26–28).

This detail is striking. Release was not tied to the death of the avenger of blood. The avenger might still be alive and resentful. The decisive event was the death of the anointed high priest.

A Type of Salvation

The arrangement in Numbers is a type—a symbolic foreshadowing of a greater reality. A type is a person, event, or institution that points forward to a fuller fulfillment (the antitype).

In this case, the avenger of blood corresponds to the accuser—the evil one who seeks the destruction of the guilty. The high priest who was anointed with the holy oil corresponds to Jesus Christ, our great High Priest. When the anointed high priest dies, the offense is removed. The one who was previously guilty of sin and worthy of death can be made clean and free from condemnation. The accuser no longer has power over those who are in Christ.

Jesus is that High Priest. He was anointed. The Gospels record the anointing at Bethany (Matthew 26:6–13; Mark 14:3–9; John 12:1–8). While Jesus was at the house of Simon the leper, a woman poured very costly fragrant oil—spikenard, or nard—from an alabaster flask on His head (and, in some accounts, His feet). The disciples called it a waste. Jesus defended her action, saying she had done it for His burial, and that wherever the gospel would be preached, what she had done would be told as a memorial to her.

That costly oil was prepared for His death. And it is through His death that we are made clean.

The Call to Remain in the Place of Refuge

The cities of refuge only protected those who stayed inside their boundaries until the appointed time. Likewise, the safety and cleansing available in Christ are found only in Him. God “now commands all men everywhere to repent, because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead” (Acts 17:30–31).

The consequences of remaining outside of Christ are final and eternal. The provision has been made. The High Priest has died and risen. The refuge is open. The question is whether we will remain in the place God has provided.

May God’s Word pierce our hearts as it needs to.

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After forty years in the wilderness, Israel stood ready to enter the Promised Land. God gave special instructions: among the forty-eight cities assigned to the Levites, six were to be set apart as **cities of refuge** (Numbers 35:6–15).

These cities were for the person who killed someone accidentally. He could flee there for protection from the "avenger of blood"—usually a relative of the one who died—until the congregation could judge the case. God carefully distinguished accidental killing from murder. If the act was intentional, driven by hatred or done with a weapon in a way that showed purpose, the person was guilty of murder and was to die. If it was truly accidental, without enmity, the congregation would protect him.

The protection, however, was not unlimited. The manslayer had to remain inside the city of refuge **until the death of the high priest who had been anointed with the holy oil** (Numbers 35:25). Only then could he return home safely. If he left the city early and the avenger found him, the avenger could kill him without guilt. The man was still guilty of taking a life; the city simply kept him safe under the conditions God had established. Release came not when the avenger died, but when the anointed high priest died.

This arrangement is a type—a picture that points forward. The avenger of blood corresponds to the accuser who seeks our destruction. The high priest anointed with oil corresponds to Jesus Christ, our great High Priest. When He died, the offense was removed. Those who were guilty and worthy of death can be made clean and free from condemnation. The accuser no longer has power over those who are in Christ.

The Gospels record the anointing of Jesus at Bethany with costly oil, preparing Him for burial (Matthew 26:6–13). Through His death we are cleansed. Yet the safety of the city of refuge only helped those who stayed inside it. In the same way, the cleansing and protection found in Christ are for those who remain in Him.

God "now commands all men everywhere to repent, because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead" (Acts 17:30–31). The refuge is open. The High Priest has died and risen. May we remain in the place God has provided.

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