

**Numbers 35:1-15**

**The church as the body of Christ is to be a place of refuge.**

I was kicked off a worship team once. Quite the story... Great team of youth that led worship for a large children's ministry at the church I grew up in. I loved that band. Good friends, talented people. The drummer would actually go on to be in on the first Christian boy bands!

I am not even sure how old I was at this point in my life, definitely a teenager. But months of leading together were great. Then, one Sunday a I arrived early for practice before service, I was met by the hurried youth pastor who told me I was no longer part of the band.

What?! "They had standards" and he didn't want me to be a bad influence. I experienced a brief devastation, I was hurt by it but enormous light was shed on why... The pastor had heard from someone that I listened to secular music!

Oh man... if only they knew what I was up to...

That experience, paired sadly with many more, formed a view of who people think the church is for. And at least in the late 1900's it wasn't for kids that might listen to the radio!

Other experiences have had me as a pastor answering questions of who should be part of the church, who should be allowed to participate, who can open the door and say hello.

Running into the questions of what environment is being built, who is welcome, what does it take to be part of these people? What kind of place is the church supposed to be?

I want to get our answer from this second-to-last chapter of Numbers. The establishment of cities of refuge.

I think this provision, the rules of vengeance, point forward to a new refuge. Two movements this morning, Cities of Refuge, and Christ as Refuge.

## **Cities of Refuge**

We have already seen in our study how death taints what it touches. But as Israel is moving into the promised land, and normal life unfolds, God gives them provision to handle what pollutes the land.

**Numbers 35:33–34** “You shall not pollute the land in which you live, for blood pollutes the land, and no atonement can be made for the land for the blood that is shed in it, except by the blood of the one who shed it. [34] You shall not defile the land in which you live, in the midst of which I dwell, for I the LORD dwell in the midst of the people of Israel.” (ESV)

Follows the inheritance for Levites, the priestly class will have cities among all of the tribes (a grace for them), and some of those cities will be for refuge for the people of Israel, and the stranger and sojourner among them.

Refuge from the “avenger of blood.”

This is God’s way of dealing with the problem of blood vengeance. [This week I kept thinking of a scene from the movie Red Dawn, where the father is imprisoned, facing death and through the fence that is his cage he cries out to his sons “Avenge Me!”]

This is the Near-Eastern reality - if someone was killed family would avenge the blood by killing the responsible party.

Paints the picture of the value of life, all life matters is significant (God is affirming that here). But where does blood vengeance end, if people keep on avenging... and what of innocence?

So Yahweh makes provision of refuge - that honestly will shape at least Western jurisprudence for all time.

“Selected cities that would be determined later were to be set aside for providing refuge for a person who had somehow carried out an act that had led to the death

of another. The manslayer had the responsibility of fleeing to the appointed city immediately after committing the crime so as to be afforded the opportunity for refuge from the potential kinsman avenger. Specifically, six cities were to be set aside for this purpose, three on each side of the Jordan River.” R. Dennis Cole

Like the earlier provision for Sabbath violators, we have justice for unintentional death and murder.

In chapter 15 statutes were outlined for Israelites to gain expiation (covering) for the sins they had committed unintentionally. As sacrificial atonement rituals were delineated in those cases, so also protection in the cities of refuge was afforded one who had committed manslaughter or unintentionally caused the death of another human being.

The ‘avenger of blood’ was not free to take private vengeance. The city of refuge provided a safe haven for the manslayer until the community had opportunity to ascertain the nature of the crime and come to a conclusion as to whether murder or manslaughter had been committed.

So instead of street justice, these cities were outposts of justice that a person could flee to for fair trial. If they committed murder they would be put to death, but if the homicide was accidental or unintentional, the manslayer shall be rescued by the people and live in the city of refuge. They would be fed, housed, and cared for by the Levites.

This is the first time “refuge” is used in Scripture. A place of safety or protection from enemies. Gracious. Of the things provided for a statute that actually function in the land when they move into it.

But more than just a place to seek safety the cities of refuge were the place to experience atonement.

Repairing a breach, replacing what has been lost. Without the “at-one-ment” there is separation.

Human life is a most precious commodity in the eyes of God. There was no monetary or sacrificial substitute for the taking of human life; only by the

shedding of human blood could the death of another be atoned for, according to Pentateuchal law.

Blood still had to be matched, life for life. No ransom could be paid. But here it is not accomplished only by an avenger of blood, by another could give their life.

The manslayer found atonement in the death of the High Priest.

**Numbers 35:28** “For he must remain in his city of refuge until the death of the high priest, but after the death of the high priest the manslayer may return to the land of his possession.” (ESV)

The One who officiated offerings before the Lord. Who made atonement for Israel each year.

The high priest’s last act of atonement was his own death, bearing the bloodguilt of accidental manslaughter away so that the one who killed without intent was finally freed to leave the city of refuge and return home. This law is significant inasmuch as Moses’ death appears to reflect something of this pattern in Deuteronomy: God’s people cannot enter the Promised Land until after he dies (Deut. 3:25–28; 34:1–5).

They could return home when the bloodguilt was borne by another. In effect the eventual death of the individual or that of the high priest ransomed the death of the victim.

Amazing provision for Israel. This brings sanity to their existence.

But what does this have to do with us?

You don’t kill folk! We live far more carefully these days... And even so we have a justice system that purports to give due process if needed.

Spiritually however, we are all in need of refuge, the atonement that is pointed to in Numbers 35. We are guilty of blood in need of blood to cover us.

**Matthew 5:21–22** “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ [22] But I say to

you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire.” (ESV)

We expect Jesus to lighten the law, to loosen restrictions. But he elevates them. If you are angry you are under judgment.

With no cities to run to, he provides himself as refuge for us.

### **Christ as Refuge**

The high priest provided atonement for the refuge seekers in the old covenant and even more meaningful for us, Jesus Christ the Mediator and High Priest of the new covenant ushers us into the heavenly presence of God, ultimately in the new creation, through his atoning death on the cross (Heb. 10:19–22) his shed blood.

As Christians, we do not need a city of refuge; Jesus is our city of refuge, the safe protection we run to when we need salvation from shame, dishonor, and terror. God, in Christ, has set up for us not a physical boundary of protection, but a spiritual one offered to all people who claim Jesus as Savior. To know Jesus is to have refuge. We no longer need to flee for refuge because it is before us in Christ.

**Hebrews 6:17–20** “So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath, [18] so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us. [19] We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain, [20] where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.” (ESV)

He is our place of rescue, of salvation.

“A refuge is a place where your life is saved. You are spared. Danger is not only avoided, it is abandoned in the safety of the structure under which you hide. If you had not gone to the refuge, you would have died. This is our life in Christ: had we not come to him, our refuge, we would have died. And if we do not

continually come to him, we will surely perish. This is what salvation is — nothing more and nothing less. Christian salvation includes (but is not limited to) complete spiritual safety. “In this world you will have trouble,” Jesus says, “but take heart. I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). Always remember that salvation is not a nice thing that happens to you when you die, salvation spares you from spiritual danger and eternal death. To be “saved” is to be rescued from peril. It’s a life-or-death move of God that brings us to eternal living.” Chris Nye

The law serves as the avenger of blood...we can never live up to it and it is after us. And we run to Jesus as our refuge.

“The type does not adequately represent the work of our Lord Jesus Christ; he is not a refuge provided for men who are innocent, but for men who are guilty,—not for those who have accidentally transgressed, but for those who have wilfully gone astray. Our Saviour has come into the world to save, not those who have by mistake and error committed sin, but those who have fearfully transgressed against well-known Divine commandments, and who have followed the sinful dictates of their own free-will, their own perversity leading them to rebel against God.” C. H. Spurgeon, “The Sinner’s Refuge,” in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons*, vol. 45 (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1899), 218.

We are the rebels. We are the manslayers. We are the murderers.

“In the gospel, the heavenly Avenger has become our Redeemer. These two offices are fused in one, just as they were in the book of Numbers. In Jesus Christ, God himself took on human flesh and became our kinsman, not to pursue us and condemn us but to deliver us. The Avenger comes after us, and we flee from him in fear; yet when he catches us, instead of killing us, he throws his arms around us and says, “Come on home — your sin has been atoned for.” The one we expected to be our judge and executioner was himself judged and executed in our place.”

Christ is the true City of Refuge, and he preserves all those who flee to him for mercy; he does that because he is the divinely-appointed Savior, able to save unto the uttermost all them that come unto God by him.

Every moment of our lives in the land of glory will be but the fruit of the shed blood of Christ’s death on our behalf, and so will be lived in praise of him (Rev. 5:11–14; 21:27).

This is not merely something we participate in just for ourselves, but we live to extend it to others. Since Jesus is our refuge and since we as the church are supposed to be the body of Christ, it only follows that the church should be a place of refuge.

The church now is the body of Christ and acts as a city of refuge for all who will come.

Sinners find safety, time to heal and be transformed, a people clinging to the gospel to get through.

We sometimes feel like being the avenger of blood - and consequences of our sin must be met and experienced - but our hope is not in our ability to atone - but in our High Priest's finished work for us.

**Hebrews 7:23–27** “The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office, [24] but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. [25] Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them. [26] For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. [27] He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did this once for all when he offered up himself.” (ESV)

This is what we then extend to each other and those compelled to come in.

Surely the fitting response is to make our churches cities of refuge, places of grace where others encounter the same mercy that we have received. The church is a community of forgiven sinners and should therefore provide a warm welcome for all who come seeking a refuge from their sins. It should be a community of forgiven sinners who are also a community of forgiving sinners.

“To all who are weary and need rest;  
To all who mourn and long for comfort;  
To all who feel worthless and wonder if God even cares;  
To all who are weak and fail and desire strength;

To all who sin and need a Savior —  
This church opens wide her doors with a welcome from Jesus,  
the mighty friend of sinners,  
the ally of his enemies,  
the defender of the indefensible,  
the justifier of those who have no excuses left...”

**The church as the body of Christ is to be a place of refuge.**

***Find Refuge:*** Don't hide. Confess, come clean, run to Jesus.

“No matter who we are or what we have done, the church should be a place of forgiveness and fellowship, where we can come in just as we are and be pointed to Christ, the one sure refuge for sinners. His death is a big enough sacrifice for any sin we may have committed in the past or any sin we will ever commit in the future. His mercy is wide enough to welcome us in, to wash us clean and keep us safe throughout our earthly pilgrimage. His grace is all we will ever need to receive, and it is the most important thing we have to share with our family, friends, and others who are as yet outsiders to the grace we have received.” ID

***Be a Refuge:*** Welcome one another as Jesus has welcomed you. Extend the grace that saved you to all who will come. All guilty before a holy God, all able to find rest and atonement in Christ.

The church is a city of refuge because we are the body of Christ. His image to the world. When we live with this welcome it truly is glorious. It is where God moves.

May it be so in us.