



I want to start out this morning with a question: What is the city you live in known for? Does it have a unique characteristic or slogan? Does it have a unique vibe? I looked up a few cities and here are some slogans I found.

Lodi, California – Livable Lovable Lodi. Sweet!

Weed, California – We'd like to welcome you. Clever!

Walla Walla, Washington – The city so nice we named it twice. Silly is good!

Algona, Iowa – Home of the world's largest Cheeto. Midwestern pride!

Gas, Kansas. Actually we will skip that one...

A town close to where my daughter lives: Menomonie, Wisconsin – Traditional yet progressive. What does that mean?

And my favorite: Cherryfield, Maine – The blueberry capital of the world.

What towns are represented here this morning? Redwood City? San Carlos? San Mateo? Atherton? What slogans do you see on the welcome signs in your city? As we look at chapters 20-21 of Joshua we are going to look at two different types of cities known for two different things to the people of Israel in their promised land. Chapter 20 describes 6 cities of refuge, and chapter 21 lists a total of 48 cities called the Cities of Levites.

To understand what is happening in these chapters, we need to remember that the Israelites were just becoming a nation with physical boundaries. They were literally able to stand on the promises of God. They had no established legal system with lawyers and judges or some kind of law enforcement in place, but they did have the book of Moses—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. All the laws were there, but they didn't have a system to put them into practice as a new nation with new geography.

One of the most important principles in those books of the law was the principle of retribution, the famous eye-for-an-eye, tooth-for-a-tooth form of justice which says "it's right to punish someone for doing something wrong by doing the same to them." This also applied to a situation where someone had been killed. The penalty for murder was death and it was the responsibility of the family of the person who was murdered to avenge that death of their family member.

We observed a need for justice and mercy from the beginning of men and women on this earth. It wasn't long after Adam and Eve disobeyed God that their son Cain murdered his brother Abel in a jealous rage. The life of Abel was sacred and it was snuffed out. The same kind of lawless activity has been going on ever since. It's a hallmark of the fallen human race.

Back in Genesis 9:6 God laid down a basic rule to Noah that anyone who sheds the blood of another man in a murderous fashion will have his blood shed by men as a penalty, for God made man in his own image. In Numbers 35:33-34 God says through Moses, *"So you shall not pollute the land in which you are; for blood pollutes the land and no atonement can be made for the land for the blood that is shed on it except for the blood of him who shed it. Do not defile the land where you live and where I dwell, for I, the Lord, dwell among the Israelites."*

But what if it was a death by accident? With no police enforcing the law, and with a system of an eye-for-an-eye, you can see why there was a need for something else, and that is why we now read about Cities of Refuge. These were needed because in this new nation, God's justice and mercy must prevail.

Why are There Cities of Refuge?

Because God's justice and mercy must prevail

God explained very carefully in Exodus 21, Numbers 35 and Deuteronomy 19 that there was to be a distinction between premeditated murder and what today we call manslaughter or a crime of passion. It's clear from these passages that while living in the wilderness, a person guilty of premeditated murder was subject to capital punishment. But if the death wasn't premeditated, or if a person killed someone by accident, the slayer could seek refuge in the sanctuary of the tabernacle, actually physically holding onto the altar as a place of safety and protection. These passages site one example of a guy working in his field and his ax head flies off the handle and kills his neighbor. In another someone in a fit of passion fights with a neighbor and the neighbor falls and hits his head on a rock and dies. And then he says the slayer or manslayer could flee to the Tabernacle in the center of their camp.

Listen to what God says through Moses in Exodus 21:12-14, *"Anyone who strikes a person with a fatal blow is to be put to death. However, if it is not done intentionally, but God lets it happen, they are to flee to a place I will designate. But if anyone*

schemes and kills someone deliberately, that person is to be taken from my altar and put to death."

From what we can tell this all worked well in the 40 years the nation wandered in the wilderness, because the tabernacle was physically at the center of that nation. But once the tribes settled throughout the land of Canaan in their respective lands, they needed these places of refuge scattered out among them. In our passage God ordains six cities of refuge, places of compassion where anyone who had killed another person could ultimately flee to wait for justice. Look at verses 1-6.

Then the Lord said to Joshua: "Tell the Israelites to designate the cities of refuge, as I instructed you through Moses, so that anyone who kills a person accidentally and unintentionally may flee there and find protection from the avenger of blood. When they flee to one of these cities, they are to stand in the entrance of the city gate and state their case before the elders of that city. Then the elders are to admit the fugitive into their city and provide a place to live among them.

If the avenger of blood comes in pursuit, the elders must not surrender the fugitive, because the fugitive killed their neighbor unintentionally and without malice aforethought. They are to stay in that city until they have stood trial before the assembly and until the death of the high priest who is serving at that time. Then they may go back to their own home in the town from which they fled."

If the fugitive was found guilty of premeditated murder, then the elders would execute that person who had come for protection. That way the victim's family would be satisfied. But if it could be established that this person had committed murder by accident or in a crime of passion, he would be given asylum in the city, safe from any threat of the avenger of blood. He would stay there because he was guilty of manslaughter as long as the priest who ministered in the temple at that time lived. The manslayer would forfeit his own freedom in order to save his own life. Look at what this new nation did to keep this principle central to their way of life.

So they set apart Kedesh in Galilee in the hill country of Naphtali, Shechem in the hill country of Ephraim, and Kiriath Arba (that is, Hebron) in the hill country of Judah. East of the Jordan (on the other side from Jericho) they designated Bezer in the wilderness on the plateau in the tribe of Reuben, Ramoth in Gilead in the tribe of Gad, and Golan in Bashan in the tribe of Manasseh.

Any of the Israelites or any foreigner residing among them who killed someone accidentally could flee to these designated cities and not be killed by the avenger of blood prior to standing trial before the assembly (verses 7-9).

The similarities between refuge found in these cities and the refuge found in our personal salvation in Jesus Christ is striking. In fact the New Testament itself relates the work of Christ to these cities. We who are guilty—that means all of us—find encouragement that God takes his promises seriously and we can be absolutely certain of our security in Jesus Christ. The writer of Hebrews connects the Cities of Refuge in the OT with our refuge in Christ. *"God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope set before us may be greatly encouraged"* (Heb. 6:18).

What Else do the Cities of Refuge Teach Us About Christ?

As sinners on the run, fugitives apart from Christ, we must run to him by faith in order to be saved. When we look at this picture we see that these Cities of Refuge were strategically placed to provide easy access next to highways and road signs. So the one we run to gives us easy access. We can always come to him any place and any time. David wrote in Psalm 34:18, *"The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit."* The Lord is somewhere to run to. The Lord is somewhere to hide. He says come. He wants it to be easy for fugitives to find their way to salvation and safety in Jesus Christ.

If we dig deeper into how these cities were administered, we find that the gates were never locked. There are no weird religious traditions they must follow to enter. No special works they must perform, no incantations to recite or rules to follow or money to pay. And even in the middle of the night the gates were not locked. Our infinite God is waiting and ready to listen. It's simply a matter of coming to him, and saying, please forgive me, accept me, please welcome me.

Notice that the only place to find protection from the avenger of blood was in the actual City of Refuge. You could be truly sorry but unless you were in the City there was no asylum. And for us if we don't flee to Christ, to the refuge God has provided us in Jesus Christ, there is no spiritual asylum for us, no salvation apart from him.

Notice too that the Cities of Refuge were open to everybody—Jew or Gentile, every tribe and tongue and nation. Jesus' offer as well was a universal offer. Romans 10:12-13 says, *"For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.'*" It doesn't matter what kind of life you've lived or not lived; Jesus offers asylum to all.

How is it possible that a God who is so holy can accept us in our guilt without compromising his absolute moral standards? The reason that only Jesus can fill this role is because he is the perfect high priest. He is the only priest without sin. So his shed blood is the only sufficient atoning sacrifice for our sins. He alone is the Lamb of God that was slain.

Did you also notice that this passage told us that the high priest's death is the only ransom for the manslayer that allows him to return home to a normal life? So the priest's death in some way atones for the blood shed and satisfies the claims of justice. The manslayer is only offered mercy and his freedom when his priest dies.

So the City of Refuge is not just a picture of God's justice, it's also a picture of God's mercy. Jesus Christ is our high priest and having died on the cross he offers us mercy and freedom. But different from the City of Refuge, our high priest died, but then he rose from the dead and lives forever. So as guilty fugitives before a holy God, when we run to Jesus for refuge we are made free forever.

Now that we know what a City of Refuge is—a place where "Justice and Mercy Prevail"—we look at another group of cities. These are called the Cities of Levites.

Why are There Cities of Levites?

The tribe of Levi was not entitled to an inheritance like all the other tribes. If you were to look back in Genesis 49, Jacob had a harsh word for Levi. He said, "I will scatter them and disperse them in Israel." This was said because years earlier Levi had been part of a massacre of the Shechemites and Jacob said Levi's actions made him a "stench to the Canaanites" back in Genesis 34:30. So Levi and his family were scattered and received no land inheritance like the other tribes did. But be encouraged that God disciplines those he loves and he was preparing the Levites to be useful to his work. If you remember the Levites became the tribe who led worship in the wilderness, who protected and transported the Ark and the Tabernacle in the wilderness. And now in the Promised Land, God placed them in a new place of service in the life of their new nation.

This should be an encouragement to all of us. In the scattering of Levi's descendants for his sins, we see God's righteous judgment on sin, but we also see they were not excluded from God's favor. Think about it: Moses, Aaron, Eli, Ezra and John the Baptist all had amazing roles to play in God's plan and they were Levites. We pick up the story in Joshua 21:3 where it says,

"So, as the Lord had commanded, the Israelites gave the Levites the following towns and pasturelands out of their own inheritance:"

God commanded the Israelites to give out of their own inheritance 48 different cities so the Levites could do their work for God and have their needs met. God dispersed these cities across the nation so that every Israelite would have an opportunity to go to worship in a Levitical City in their proximity. God did it this way to make it clear that in this new nation worship must prevail for all.

Because worship must prevail

The first lot came out for the Kohathites, according to their clans. The Levites who were descendants of Aaron the priest were allotted thirteen towns from the tribes of Judah, Simeon and Benjamin. The rest of Kohath's descendants were allotted ten towns from the clans of the tribes of Ephraim, Dan and half of Manasseh.

The descendants of Gershon were allotted thirteen towns from the clans of the tribes of Issachar, Asher, Naphtali and the half-tribe of Manasseh in Bashan. The descendants of Merari, according to their clans, received twelve towns from the tribes of Reuben, Gad and Zebulun.

So the Israelites allotted to the Levites these towns and their pasturelands, as the Lord had commanded through Moses (verses 4–8).

This tells us that even though the Tabernacle remained in Shiloh God didn't want the Levites concentrated there; he wanted them spread out so they could model worship all throughout the nation. So God's plan for the Levites wasn't only about worship leading, it was also about teaching the Word of God. They were to influence each tribe to be faithful to the Lord. Look at the strong language that Moses used when he commissioned the tribe of Levi back in Deuteronomy shortly before his death.

Because the Word must prevail

"He said of his father and mother, 'I have no regard for them.' He did not recognize his brothers or acknowledge his own children, but he watched over your word and guarded your covenant. He teaches your precepts to Jacob and your law to Israel" (Deut. 33:9-10a). The Levites became the teachers, the theologians, the storytellers, counselors and inspired preachers in the new nation in the land. And finally the Levites were called to be cities for outreach.

Because outreach must prevail

In verses 9-40 the cities are summarized. They are listed in careful detail, evenly distributed.

The towns of the Levites in the territory held by the Israelites were forty-eight in all, together with their pasturelands (v. 41).

They formed an oval around the center of the nation. God didn't cluster them in a safe place; he put them all over, even on the wildest frontiers on the outskirts where Philistines dominated the Mediterranean coast and the Sidonians dominated the North. These cities were to stand in complete contrast to the pagan places of worship that were still on the landscape. God designed these cities to be in areas that were not yet fully safe and secure.

What Do the Cities of Levites Teach Us About the Church?

It was pretty cool to see all the parallels between what these cities were and what we are challenged to be as the local church. I want to include this morning two of my favorite New Testament passages that teach us about the local church. *“And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching”* (Heb. 10:24-25).

This is such an encouraging passage. We need to be in proximity to one another so we can hold each other accountable and not forget about the critical nature of meeting together as a habit. Why? Because these verses imply that as time marches forward, things will get harder and harder and we will need each other more and more in difficult times. But even more than that, when we all gather together as people of God, something unique happens. When we express our worship through music and praise, when we pray together, when we are challenged by the Scriptures and gather at the Lord's Table, we more and more realize our identity is now in Christ, and understanding our identity changes everything. It changes how we work, play, relax, relate to our family, our friends, our co-workers, those who have hurt us and those we have hurt.

We have looked at Israel as a new nation in a new land, now I want to close us with a passage that describes the church as a brand new community. The church had just been born and the writer of Acts gives us a very clear picture of what the members of this new church community were to make a habit of every day so that they might grow. Acts 2:42-47 tells us what the brand new church did regularly and faithfully. *“They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the*

breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”

May CPC be a City of Refuge. May CPC be a place to run to and to hide in to find justice and mercy. May CPC be like a City of the Levites—where we provide ways of connection with God and provide ways to connect with one another in community. May we worship and feed on his Word. May we be witnesses of grace and mercy to each other. And may the world find us somewhere to run to, somewhere to hide. May the world look at us and what we have and say, “I want what he has. I want what she has.”

Joshua closes chapter 21 and he closes his detailed allotment of the Promised Land to the tribes of Israel with these final words:

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

God is faithful... God gives the victory.... God keeps his promises.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.