



Happy Sunday after Thanksgiving! I'm excited because this morning we're enjoying family worship. It's a time for us to worship as a church body. I recently read a story about Sadhu Sundar Singh who gave his life to Christ in the early 20th century. One day after a long journey, he sat down and was resting in front of a house. Suddenly a sparrow, helplessly blown by the wind, came flying directly towards him. He was curious as to why this little bird was flying towards him. Then, out of the corner of his eye, he saw the cause. An eagle was trying to capture the panicky sparrow as it was blown by the wind. Threatened from different directions, the sparrow flew into his lap. By choice a bird would not normally do that. However, the little bird was seeking refuge from a great danger.

Most of our experience with sparrows has to do with them flying away from us. My guess is not many of you have had a sparrow fly into your lap. Think about the last time you were threatened from multiple directions. Where did you run? Think about the last time you experienced great suffering or pain. Who did you turn to? What about the Israelites? Where did they run when things got bad?

Open your Bible to Joshua 20 with me as we continue our series Ventures in Faith. This morning we're going to look at Joshua 20 and 21 and answer the question in the title of this sermon: "Where can I run?"

### **Protection for All**

If this is your first morning with us, let me catch you up. For the last few weeks we've been looking at allotments of land for the twelve tribes of Israel. Now we come to the part where God asks Joshua to designate cities of refuge for His people.

**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" (Josh. 20:1–6).**

After the land has been allotted, God initiates the process of setting up cities of refuge with His servant Joshua. This wasn't a new concept; the idea of cities of refuge have already been given through Moses. These cities are an important step for the nation of Israel. Israel is now living in the Promised Land and new parameters need to be established. An example of these rules is for when a person accidentally kills somebody. While Israel was living in the desert, if a person accidentally killed someone, they were permitted to go into the tent of meeting and grab the horns of the altar (Ex. 21:12-13). No one was to be killed who was holding onto the horns. This was a community guideline designated to protect a person.

The first six verses of chapter 20 give the description of the function of these cities. They explain the judicial system used to protect or condemn a person, including the protection a person could expect during an accidental death trial. Israel has no official police force and the nation needs structure to survive. There needs to be a way for a person who accidentally kills someone else to find protection from an emotional family member of the victim. Therefore God establishes cities of refuge to protect His people and to guarantee a fair hearing. From what historians know of the ancient near east, cities of refuge only appear in Israel; they are found nowhere else.

Looking over these chapters in Joshua, the first thing God does is explain the reason for going to a city of refuge. God gives clear instructions: The person is to go to the city gate and state their case. The city gate is a place where the main legal activity took place. Upon arrival there a person could state their case. After the case had been stated, they would be welcomed into the city of refuge. Now at this point a trial would need to take place. The jury may have been composed of elders from the city of refuge and elders from the city the person fled. If it was determined that the death was accidental, the person would receive sanctuary and protection in the city of refuge until the death of the High Priest.

The High Priest's death would act as an atonement, or forgiveness, for their mistake, and then the person could return home. The text assumes they would want to return home after the death of the High Priest. There is a hope that the elapsed time

would then allow the victim's family to act rationally. If a family member decided to kill this person after they've returned home, that family member would then be found guilty of murder and punished for their actions. *"...so that anyone who kills a person accidentally and unintentionally may flee there and find protection from the avenger of blood"* (v. 3).

Notice in verse 3 that God makes a distinction between murder and manslaughter. I know we have our kids in the room this morning, so let me make this as simple as possible: Murder is planned and manslaughter is accidental or not done on purpose. We're talking about the latter. We're talking about protection for a person who accidentally kills someone.

Moses originally gave this command back in Deuteronomy 19 as a protection for God's people. This is important because right after God gave the Israelites the Ten Commandments, in Exodus 20, there was a law that we refer to as "an eye for an eye." *"But if there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise"* (Ex. 21:23-25). The nation of Israel was living under this law that said if someone poked out your eye you could poke out their eye. If a person struck you and you lost a tooth, you could strike them and knock out their tooth. This also meant that if you took a person's life you could expect your life to be taken.

God established cities of refuge to protect His people who are created in His image. God loves His people and has good plans for us. In a situation of manslaughter, a fleeing person would be exhausted, broken and hurting from all that had just happened. He or she did not intend to kill someone and they would be looking for comfort in a heartbreaking time. Listen to what the Psalmist writes. *"The Lord is a refuge for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble"* (Psalm 9:9). The Lord is a refuge for His people. He protects His people when times seem dire and crazy!

The Bible shares many stories of people who found refuge in God. The Gospels gives us great accounts of men and women who found hope in Christ. There are stories where people who have done less than murder find refuge in Christ. Think about the apostle Paul—who actually did commit murder—and how he found refuge in Christ.

One of my favorite New Testament stories occurs when Christ is hanging on the cross. He is moments away from His death and there are other criminals hanging next to Him. One criminal hurls insults at Jesus, taunting Him to save Himself. But there is another man, one who is nearing the conclusion of his time on earth. This man rebukes the other criminal. He knows he is being punished justly for his crimes. As his time nears an end, he looks over to Jesus with a sorrowful heart. At this point in his life he sees the pain of his decisions. He recognizes how much of life he really missed out on because of his actions. He simply asks Jesus

to remember him when Jesus comes into His Kingdom. Jesus replies and tells him this very day he will be with Jesus in paradise. *"Then he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.' Jesus answered him, 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise'"* (Luke 23:42-43). He found refuge in Christ at the time he needed it most.

Listen to what Elisabeth Elliot says about Christ being a refuge for those in need: "Where does your security lie? Is God your refuge, your hiding place, your stronghold, your shepherd, your counselor, your friend, your redeemer, your savior, your guide? If He is, you don't need to search any further for security." This is exactly what the man on the cross found to be true. He found his refuge, security and hiding place in Jesus Christ at the moment it was most needed. This rescue is also available to each of us.

Before we continue in our text, let me make one more observation from these first six verses of Joshua 20. Maybe you already thought about the parallels we see in the cities of refuge and Jesus Christ. It's not a perfect example, but there is almost a foreshadow of Christ here. When you make a mistake—let's call that sin—you can flee from your mistake and run to Christ. Now in Christ there is no condemnation, there is no trial that must take place because He has already paid for your sins. His shed blood on the cross is your atonement and forgiveness of sin. You don't have to remain in the city, exiled from your loved ones, because Christ has already forgiven you of your sin. When you read the Old Testament, it's a valuable exercise to look for connections to Christ. Just as the city of refuge provided protection to all, there is protection for all in Christ.

### **Designated Cities of Refuge**

As we continue to recognize how God is a refuge to those in need, let's quickly look at the cities that were designated for refuge.

**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 (Josh. 20:7-9).**

After the instructions are given, there is a list of the city names. There are three cities on the west side of the Jordan and three cities on the east side of the Jordan. Each city is about a half-day's journey from anywhere in Israel. As a comparison, the area of the nation of Israel is about the same distance as traveling from San Francisco to just north of San Luis Obispo, and from the coast to the 99 freeway. For kids, San Luis Obispo is about halfway to

Disneyland and the 99 freeway is where it gets really hot! Just trying to help you out!

The meanings of the city names are interesting. If you take them in the order of their listing and translate each to English we learn that: Kedesh = righteousness, Shechem = shoulder, Hebron = fellowship, Bezer = fortress or strong, Ramoth = heights, and Golan = exile. This can be used to describe what a person finds when they run to God in their distress. First, He gives you righteousness. He will carry you on His shoulders like a shepherd carries a sheep. You enter fellowship with Him. He will be your strong fortress in times of trouble. You can dwell in the heights even if you're an exile! This is the refuge that God is to those in need. If you're in need this morning, this is exactly who God is for you. God is a refuge for you and will carry you through any struggle you're experiencing.

### **Strategically Placed Throughout the Tribes**

The names of these cities are what connects the passage from chapter 20 to chapter 21. We have the cities of refuge; we know the names of the cities and now we're going to read about more Levitical cities. I'm not going to read all of Joshua 21, but let's look at the first few verses.

**Now the family heads of the Levites approached Eleazar the priest, Joshua son of Nun, and the heads of the other tribal families of Israel at Shiloh in Canaan and said to them, "The Lord commanded through Moses that you give us towns to live in, with pasturelands for our livestock." So, as the Lord had commanded, the Israelites gave the Levites the following towns and pasturelands out of their own inheritance: (Josh. 21:1-3).**

The first thing that happens is that the family heads of the Levites ask Joshua, Eleazar the Priest, and the other tribal family heads for their share of the land.

The land isn't completely portioned out because the Levites don't have their share yet. As a quick reminder, the Levites are the spiritual leaders of the nation of Israel. They do the work on the Temple of the Lord and teach God's word. When the Levites approach the leaders, they remind them that their inheritance was promised to them by the Lord and by Moses. Since they are the spiritual leaders of that nation, their inheritance really is simply God. *"But to the tribe of Levi, Moses had given no inheritance; the Lord, the God of Israel, is their inheritance, as he promised them"* (Josh. 13:33). Yes, they will have towns and pasturelands, but their inheritance is God.

Second, we see that the leaders follow the command of the Lord and give them the towns each group is asking for. What a great example of sharing! I was meeting with my men's group the other night and a guy told a story about his daughter who had a popsicle and gave it to another kid because she saw that he didn't have a popsicle. Kids, have you ever been given something and it was

hard for you to give it away? That wasn't the case for the Israelites. They were given land from God and they knew it wasn't theirs to possess, so they freely gave it to their relatives. They wanted their relatives to also have towns, so they gave freely. What a great example of giving as we enter this Christmas season!

The third thing we notice comes in verses 4-8 of Joshua 21.

**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.**

The distribution of the land is explained in these verses. We see where each clan will end up residing and which towns the Levites are given to live in. In verses 9-42 we're given a more detailed account about the towns, the clans and their inheritance. In total, the Levites are given 48 towns in Israel. It appears they are scattered throughout the land but upon further investigation you find they are strategically placed among God's people.

The Levites are placed throughout all Israel to teach and model God's ordinances. God did not want the Levites all gathered in one location, separate from everyone else. The point is that God wanted His people to model His ways to His people. The Levites had a better opportunity to influence the other tribes by being strategically located among them. It goes further too; the parents would model faith to their children and train up their children. Their example would encourage others to do the same.

You might be thinking, "Neal, how do I live like the Levites?" I'm glad you asked the question. It reminds me of Jesus' words from the Sermon on the Mount. *"You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot. You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven"* (Matt. 5:13-16). Just as the Levites were placed to be a model to the ways of God, Christ-followers are called to be a light to a dark world. Those of you who have placed

your trust in Christ are called to bring the love of God to those who have not yet done so. Jesus said, "Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in Heaven."

Instead of giving you examples of what it means to be a light to those around you I'm going to talk about what it **doesn't** look like. If you're a Christ-follower, you probably know what this means to be a light. But for whatever reasons, we often get too distracted with our personal lives. We don't engage in conversations with people who don't know Jesus because we get afraid they may reject us. We don't have meaningful conversations with our neighbors because we think it might take more time than we want to invest. Instead of comforting hurting people who we work alongside, we go into our homes and sit on our couches. Instead of talking to the kid at school who is crying we stay with our friends to make sure we will fit in. We do these things because it is less risky for us. It requires less emotional involvement and seems more comfortable.

But when we engage in tough conversations, care for hurting people, and comfort those around us, it's an outflow of what God is doing in your heart. It reminds me of what the Psalmist said, "I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you." Or how Jesus encouraged His disciples to love one another and by loving each other the world would know they were His disciples. Or how Paul encouraged the church in Ephesus to speak kindly to others. He also encouraged the church at Thessalonica to pray continually. When we hide God's word in our heart, love others, speak kindly to others, and pray for others we are modeling the love of Christ. Just as the Levites were strategically placed in Israel, God has strategically placed us in our cities, neighborhoods and schools to show His love.

Now there are times we fail to show the light of Christ to others. None of us are perfect at this. Four and half years ago I graduated from seminary. It was a beautiful Saturday afternoon. I had worked on my master's degree for seven years straight while working full-time as a pastor in Las Vegas. After the graduation ceremony my family took me to lunch. We had a great time and then loaded in the rental car to head to the hotel. I had my wife and two daughters in the car with me. As we pulled onto the freeway, I saw a couple who appeared to be homeless. The man was beating the woman on the side of the onramp. He had his fist raised as she cowered under his strength. I did nothing. I didn't stop, I didn't call the police, I didn't even honk at him. I missed my chance to be a refuge for that woman.

I've vowed to myself to not let another opportunity to be a safe place for another person to pass again. Will you do the same and be a refuge for those in need? Will you be a refuge for hurting people?

### **The Distribution of the Land is Complete**

**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 (Josh. 21:43-45).**

After this long section of the division of towns and pasturelands for the Levites, Joshua closes the chapter with three affirmations. These three verses are a summary of the last eight chapters:

- God was faithful to give Israel the land. The land wasn't won or bought. The land was an inheritance given by the Lord.
- God gave Israel victory over their enemies and rest from war.
- God kept His promises.

This summary for Israel is the same summary for our lives: God is faithful, He gives us victory, and He will always keep His promises. God's good promises will be fulfilled in your life because God is a refuge for those in need.

There is a wonderful progression here in Joshua 20 and 21. God takes the lead by setting up cities of refuge. God shows how important human life is and how He is a refuge for all people. We saw this further played out in the names of the cities of refuge. Then as we transitioned to chapter 21 we saw that the Levites also needed God as a refuge because they had no inheritance; but their inheritance is God! God has invited us to partner with Him in being the light of the world. It means we need to act. There will be opportunities in our lives where God will allow us to be a refuge for His people just as Sadhu Sundar Singh was a refuge for the sparrow. These chapters are also a practical reminder that God is a refuge for those who are far from Him. If you are far from God, you can run to God in your confusion, your struggle and your pain. Next time you ask yourself, *Where can I run when times are troublesome*, know you can run to God because He is a refuge to those in need!

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

© 2016 Central Peninsula Church, Foster City, CA  
Catalog No. 1423-12FC