

Are you in a safe place? Not a good question for a parent to have to ask.

The summer of 2010 Aaron went on a student led missions trip to Guatemala with some other college students. I had a lot of apprehensions about the whole trip. While they were there, a volcano began acting up. This was quickly followed by sinkholes, major mudslides and Tropical Storm Agatha. The airport was closed for several days. They couldn't leave Guatemala when they were scheduled to leave. It was hard to get information about what was going on and whether they were in a safe place.

In the States, when disasters happens, often there can be looting and other violence. Multiply that several times in a place like Guatemala. I was very concerned in a state of emergency, Aaron might not be in a safe place. We began reaching out to friends in the region to see if we might even bring the team out through Honduras. Everything worked out but it was a tense few days. **Are you in a safe place?**

The Bible talks a lot about safety. God makes special provision for safety, both physical and spiritual. One of God's provisions for safety is tucked away in the Old Testament in what was known as the Cities of Refuge. Here we find a powerful picture of the Gospel. Turn to Joshua 20:1-6 (p. 194).

While today, civilized people attempt to live within the constraints of law and order, the ancient world lived under the law of the jungle. It's why God instituted these Cities of Refuge.

Recently, there have been stories in the media about "sanctuary" for illegal immigrants. We find this concept of sanctuary in a well-known literary source, Victor Hugo's, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (**picture**). Sanctuary is central to Hugo's story.

Sanctuary was originally God's idea, finding its roots in the Mosaic Law. It's so important under the Old Covenant, it's commanded and explained 3 times in the Pentateuch (Ex. 21:13; Num. 35:6-14; Deut. 19:1-13). Now that they're in the Promised Land, Joshua 20 unpacks the fulfillment of this ordinance.

Can you imagine living in a society without police officers, courts or a judicial system? People took matters into their own hands, often unjustly. In ancient times, if a man was killed, his relatives had the right to take revenge. Loss of life was very serious. This relative who sought retaliation was called "the avenger of blood." In a time when there were no police forces, this arrangement saw to it no one took murder lightly. Yet, because of the emotions involved with the loss of a family member, this system often resulted in retaliation and injustice.

The avenger of blood, in his anger and pain at the death of a loved one, might not care whether the killing was intentional or accidental, whether it was murder or manslaughter. He's consumed with retribution. To protect the "innocent," God established 6 cities of refuge. They were to help maintain justice, yet show mercy and protect the innocent.

Our laws regarding murder and manslaughter are based on an Old Testament ethic. While both Old and New Testaments teach capital punishment for intentional homicide, accidental death or manslaughter is not the same thing. It's not murder.

For example, two men are chopping down trees. One man's ax flies off the handle, strikes his partner, killing him. It's an accidental death.

Some years back my sister and her husband were driving down the Interstate. A man walked right out in front of them, and they struck and killed him. It was an accidental killing, not a homicide. If there's negligence, it might be manslaughter. It's not murder. The person responsible for an accidental death shouldn't be executed or have to also give their life. God's law takes into account motive and intent in such cases. The Hebrew word for *unintentionally* means literally "he did not know." Someone without a murderer's heart shouldn't be condemned to a murderer's punishment.

In ancient times blood revenge was widely practiced. The vendetta might be handed down from generation to generation, Innocent people were caught in the crosshairs. In one area of Italy, over a period of four centuries, more than 600,000 people were wounded or murdered out of revenge.

The loss of a loved one is emotionally charged. We instinctively feel there's something wrong with the sudden death of anyone. If a premature illness is the cause, we may be angry at fate or question God. If a human agent is involved, however much or little to blame, our anger finds a target, someone to focus on. In the heat of the moment a relative might kill an innocent person who was innocent of a capital crime.

Under God's program, if an accidental death took place, the person responsible could flee to one of these cities of refuge, find sanctuary to be protected from the avenger of blood. The elders of the city would have a trial. If he was guilty of murder, he'd be executed. But if it was an accidental death, the man was to live in that city safe from the avenger of blood until the high priest at that time died.

These cities of refuge were spread evenly around the nation of Israel so at least one of them was easily accessible. Israel is about the size of the state of Maryland. No one was ever very far from one of these cities of refuge.

These cities of refuge build a powerful picture of the Gospel. This morning let's consider several insights about the Gospel and these cities of refuge.

1. The Cities of Refuge remind us human life is sacred. God places a high premium on human life. Human beings are created in God's own image. The shedding of blood is very serious.

In ancient Israel, capital punishment was practiced. Murderers couldn't avoid justice. Responsibility for implementing justice was shared by all of the people because murder was so serious in God's eyes. Capital punishment then, correctly understood, guards the sanctity of human life. Murder, in contrast, has the effect of cheapening human life. Any time we devalue, dishonor or demean another human being, we dishonor God.

As those who believe every human being is an image-bearer of God, we can't compromise on the evil of abortion. Rationalizations will come in many guises. For example, you'll hear arguments like, "if it will cure other diseases or be economically beneficial, why not use aborted body parts? Abortion is evil but since it's happened, let's benefit from it." The same arguments could have been made by lampshade manufacturers during the Holocaust. "Since that Jewish baby has been killed, why not use baby skin to benefit others?"

God won't let society get away with murder. One day He'll hold America accountable. Innocent blood cries out to God. Personally, I believe we'll see an increasing movement to legalize euthanasia. Listen carefully to the language used – "quality of life" or "death with dignity." If many had their way, ministries like Shepherds or Inspiration Ministries would cease to exist.

The value of human life should affect the way we interact with society: how we relate to others, conduct business, treat our neighbor, even how we drive our cars. Human life is very precious! Do we value human life as God does? Too often we value lifeless material things more than living image bearers.

The chapter breathes with the sanctity of human life – both the dead man's and the manslayer. While the provision of the cities of refuge assumes the preciousness of the unintentional manslayer's life, the slain man's life is presumed precious as well.

The city of refuge is a place of safety and a place of exile. The manslayer enjoys protection but suffers penalty. He can't, assuming the case is decided in his favor, return home to resume normal life. He must stay in the city of refuge until the death of the current high priest. He can't leave the bounds of the city. If he does, he's fair game for the slain man's family. The city of refuge becomes both a refuge and a prison. Human life is precious.

The establishment of those special sanctuaries among the cities of the Levites is traceable to the idea the Levites would be impartial judges. Their presence and counsel might calm the stormy passions of the blood avenger. By their consecration as priests, Levites were mediators between the Israelites and God. As such, they were gifted to calmly mediate between the attacker and victim's family, ensuring no further bloodshed occurred.

A wonderful biblical truth rarely taught today is "the priesthood of the believer." 1 Peter 2:4-5 says, "*As you come to Him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.*" Believers are to be the mediators and peacemakers in our vicious and violent world.

2. The Cities of Refuge remind us salvation is initiated by God.

a. *These cities were provided by God.* Human beings didn't come up with the idea for these cities. This idea was birthed in the heart and mind of God. He wanted to teach His people murderers had to pay for their crimes, hence, the avenger of blood. He also wanted to teach His people there's a place of mercy for those who were only guilty of an accident.

Jesus Christ is the gift of God! The Gospel didn't originate in the heart of man. It's all God's idea! From start to finish the Gospel is the work of God.

When man creates a religion, he fixes it in such a way that he's in control of it. He sets up a system of works and makes himself responsible for getting himself to whatever Heaven he's striving for. God, on the other hand, does it in such a way man is left out of the picture. All man does is trust Jesus as his Savior by faith. And, even that faith is given to him by the Lord, Ephesians 2:8-9. Salvation is all of God.

b. *These cities illustrate God's grace.* Couldn't God have allowed the manslayer to die like any other person who'd taken a life? Sure. But in His grace He made a way for someone who'd accidentally taken the life of another could find refuge and help.

Wouldn't God be just to send all sinners to Hell? After all, we're all guilty in His sight. We deserve nothing but judgement. But God in His grace sent Jesus to take our sins upon Himself on the cross. He paid the price so sinners like us might live through Him.

Whatever anyone may tell you about getting to Heaven, the Bible tells us it will never happen unless it happens through grace. It's all God from start to finish! He initiates the process (John 6:44; Eph. 2:1). He provides the means (Rom. 3:25; Acts 4:12). He saves those who believe (Acts 16:31) and keeps those He saves (1 Peter 1:5). You and I are capable of doing none of these things ourselves. If we were left alone to get ourselves to Heaven, we'd all wind up in Hell!

3. The Cities of Refuge remind us of salvation's power. Some years ago on New Year's Day during the Tournament of Roses parade (**picture**), a beautiful float suddenly sputtered and quit. It was out of gas. The whole parade stalled until someone could get a can of gas. The ironic thing was this float represented the Standard Oil Company. With its vast oil resources, its truck was out of gas.

God's gift of salvation has unlimited resources. It never runs out of "gas."

When the manslayer arrived in the city, his case was heard by the elders. If it was determined the death was an accident, he's protected from the avenger of blood. The city of refuge allowed a man to live who'd otherwise surely died. That's power, power over life and death.

Jesus is the only One Who can guarantee salvation. When a sinner comes to Christ by faith and accepts Him as Savior, he or she is immediately adopted into the family of God. Their sins are washed away forever and their name written in the Lamb's book of Life in Heaven. They're forever saved by the grace of God! No other system of belief can make that claim!

a. These cities remind us of the security of our salvation. As long as the person stayed within the city, he's safe. He was to live there until the high priest died. When the high priest died, he was free to go home without fear.

When we trust Christ as Savior, we too are secure. But unlike the person in the city of refuge, we can't leave. It's impossible for us to get out of our relationship with our Heavenly Father. Jesus said, (John 10:28-29), "*I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand.*"

But what about on the Day of judgement? If it was determined the manslayer was guilty, he was cast out. I know I'm guilty, so what does that say about my situation? It adds another blessing. Because when Jesus died on the cross it was our judgment day! That day has now past forever. We're safe in our High Priest, for as long as He lives – which is forever.

b. These cities remind us of the sufficiency of our salvation. The cities of refuge worked for anyone who fled to them. They're sufficient for the need.

Jesus Christ is sufficient for the need of your soul. Regardless of the past you carry around, the depths of your sin, or the hardness of your heart. Regardless of anything you wish to name you feel might keep you from coming to Him, He's bigger than all of it! He's God and able to save your soul! His power is sufficient to the task. No one needs to fear it won't work for them! God's promise of salvation is given to all who come to Him.

4. The Cities of Refuge remind us of the universality of salvation. The six cities are named in verses 7-8. They're permanent cities of refuge. Their status could never be changed.

It's like our salvation. It's promised in God's Word. It can never change. There were cities in Israel bigger or more prominent but none could shelter the sinner. There are many religions, but there's only one way of salvation (Acts 4:12).

Anyone could access these cities of refuge. They were in central places on both sides of the Jordan River. They were easy to reach from any place in the country. God expressly commanded roads be made to these cities.

If you look at a map of the Holy Land, you'll find the six cities were arranged so no tribe was too far from the place of safety. On the west side of Jordan were Kedesh in the north, Shechem in the central area, and Hebron in the south. Across the river on the east side (where Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh chose to settle) were Golan in the north, Ramoth in the central section, and Bezer in the south. These cities were easily accessible.

From Jewish literature we can add some further detail about the highways. They were carefully repaired every spring, after the rains and bad weather of winter. Bridges were built where needed so people didn't have to run down into a ravine but could go straight across, taking the shortest possible route to the city. At every crossroad were special signs which said, "Refuge!" and pointed in the direction of the city. These signposts had to be large enough so a man running fast could easily read them. Runners were even stationed to guide the fugitives to the place of safety.

Can you picture a man coming down the road? He's being pursued by others, armed, ready to kill him. The fugitive approaches the sign and sees the big word, "Refuge" magnified! He runs to the city and is safe.

These cities of refuge were open to all — to the Israelite and foreigner, “*anyone who killed a person without intent*” (vs. 9). What New Testament verse sounds like this? John 3:16 “*whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.*” From nonbiblical sources we learn the great doors of these cities were always left open and never locked. Otherwise a man might die while beating on the door.

Each city of refuge was stocked with food. It’s a completely sufficient refuge. Not only providing legal protection, but also meeting a man’s needs once he’s inside. The cities of refuge were totally adequate for the needs of the endangered ones. As long as the slayer remained in the city, he was safe. We know from Scripture if a killer did not flee to a city of refuge, there was no other hope. The slayer is urged to flee to a city of refuge. It’s not something to procrastinate about.

5. Jesus Christ is our City of Refuge. Some of our hymns pick up on this theme of the Old Testament city of refuge and apply it to our relationship with Christ. Remember that hymn, “*How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord, Is laid for your faith in His excellent word! What more can He say than to you He hath said, To you who for refuge to Jesus have fled?*” Students of Scripture see in these cities of refuge a picture of our salvation in Jesus Christ, to whom we “*have fled for refuge*” (Heb. 6:18). The lost sinner, of course, is in danger of judgment because “*the wages of sin is death*” (Rom. 6:23). The avenger of blood is after him or her! God’s justice is chasing him or her down. God’s appointed Savior though is Jesus Christ but the sinner must come to Him by faith in order to be saved (Matt. 11:28-30; John 6:37). Wonderfully, these cities were for both Jews and aliens. Salvation is for all! God wants everyone to be saved!

Beyond this, the picture is one of contrast. When we come to Christ for salvation, there’s no need for an investigation or trial. We know we’re guilty. We’ve all sinned and admit it! The only people Jesus can save are those who confess their guilt and throw themselves on His mercy. We’re not like a man who runs to a city of refuge and is acquitted after a trial because he’s innocent. None of us are innocent. We are all sinners.

If the fugitive prematurely left the city of refuge, he could be killed, but our salvation is unconditional. Our High Priest will never die, thus, we’re forever secure, “*because Jesus lives forever, He has a permanent priesthood. Therefore He is able to save completely those who come to God through Him, because He always lives to intercede for them*” (Hebrews 7:24-25).

But while there were six cities of refuge, there’s only one Savior. Jesus is unique. God offers no alternative to Him. If a sinner wants salvation there’s just one Savior to go to. There are not multiple roads to heaven.

The Old Testament killer fleeing for his life didn’t have options. He couldn’t choose between going to Jerusalem or Bethlehem for refuge. The choice is not his to make. God ordained where refuge was to be found. It’s one of these six cities or nowhere. In the same way God ordained that “*Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved*” (Acts 4:12). Jesus Christ is the only way to heaven!

Conclusion: These cities of refuge were a constant reminder of God’s protection in ancient Israel of the innocent. They’re a signpost to us too, pointing us as the guilty, to Jesus Christ our “city of refuge.”

The bottom line is that unless we’ve fled by faith to Jesus Christ, we have no salvation. It’s my sins and your sins that put Jesus on the Cross. All of us are guilty of His death. He’s the only Savior. Have you fled to him? Have you responded to His desire to enter your life and forgive your sin?

One of the things that gravely concerns me is the way people will often settle for just hanging around the church. In ancient Israel it wouldn’t have done any good to move close to a city of refuge or set up camp outside the wall. Just hanging around God’s people won’t make you a Christian.

Unless you’ve personally acknowledged your guilt and fugitive status, unless you’ve run to Jesus for refuge, you’re not saved. It’s frightening to me to think of someone hearing this and walking away, and in the words of Hebrews, *trampling under their feet what God did for them in Jesus Christ.*

In a terrifying world with less and less certainty of physical safety, in a condemning world with all the reminders of your sinful failures and premeditated rebellion against God, are you tired of running and hiding? The consequences of sin can be dealt with once and for all. You can experience safety and protection in the arms of Jesus. You don’t have to fear the avenger of blood anymore. You don’t have to live with the gnawing uncertainty about death itself and what will happen when it confronts you.

In the early 1980’s the threat of nuclear war hung over much of the world. One couple, so fearful of that threat, sought to find a place somewhere on this planet where they’d be free from any danger of war. After much time and attention to geography, trying to find the securest place possible, they settled on a group of islands, seemingly isolated from the rest of the world – the Falklands. We know them as the Falkland Islands (**picture**).

If you’re familiar with recent history, you know in 1982, not very long after this couple had settled there, a brief, undeclared war was fought between Argentina and Great Britain in 1982 over the control of the Falkland Islands. Overnight their paradise was turned into a war zone.

A lot of people are looking for safety, spiritual safety. They want to somehow hide out from God's justice and holiness. They try to hide behind their good works or that they live morally. Some give lots of money to the church or are faithful church members. Some obey the Ten Commandments or have been baptized or catechized.

My friend, all of those things will still leave you outside Heaven's gates to face God's justice. There's only one place of safety. Jesus Christ is our city of refuge. But we must come to Him and we must come His way. As John 3:16-18 says, *"For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him. Whoever believes in Him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son."*

Have you fled to Christ? Is Jesus your city of eternal refuge? Have you committed your life to Him? Have you accepted Him as your personal Lord and Savior? Are you living eternally in Him as your city of refuge or you still living outside the walls, facing judgement and eternal condemnation?