

Cities of Refuge



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Numbers 33–36, Josh. 20:1–7, Ephesians 2.*

Memory Text: “We . . . who have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us: which hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and stedfast” (*Hebrews 6:18, 19*).

Though God was faithful in doing all that He had promised, the nation itself, at least that first generation, proved unfaithful and—instead of inheriting the land offered it—died in a harsh wilderness on the wrong side of the Jordan River, the side they were to have fled from and not to have died in. What a tragedy, especially because it didn't need to happen. All that they had been given, all that God had done for them, and yet, still they refused to trust, refused to act in faith even though they had witnessed dramatic manifestations of God's power in ways that most of us never have seen and, at least in this life, probably never will.

But the Lord was not through. No way. The theme of the Bible, again and again, is that God will fulfill His promises. The Lord will have His redeemed people in a new heaven and new earth. That is beyond question. The only question for us is, Will we be there, or will we be like the first generation, who despite all that was done for them, refused to enter into the promises given them?

This week, our last week in Numbers, we'll look at some of the final preparations as the children of Israel get ready to claim their promised inheritance.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, December 26.*

History Lesson

Read Numbers 33. Why do you think the Lord had Moses write down their “starting points, stage by stage”? What purpose could that serve?

It’s really an incredible history, if you think about it. An entire nation flees its captors after centuries of oppression and survives for four decades wandering in the hostile environment of the Sinai wilderness. Only by the grace, power, and miracles of God could this have happened. Notice, too, how the text in Numbers 33:2 stressed that they moved place to place “by the commandment of the Lord.” The Lord wanted them, and future generations, never to forget that the whole story of the Hebrew people on the move in the wilderness was, really, the story about God and His dealings with sinful human beings in an effort to save them and to bring them into the Promised Land.

However powerful the story of their wanderings, today there are biblical scholars who, while not denying the reality of a group of ex-slaves leaving Egypt, nevertheless try to attribute it to purely natural circumstances. That is, they were doing exactly what the Lord didn’t want done, and that is to forget that God was central to all that had happened.

Read Numbers 33:50–56. Putting aside the immediate historical context (and the inevitable difficult issues it raises for us today), what important spiritual principle is found in these texts? From what you know of the history of ancient Israel after they had settled the land, why was this commandment about dealing with these peoples so important?

Compromise with the world has been and continues to be “barbs in your eyes and thorns in your sides” (*vs. 55, NRSV*) for the Lord’s people. Unless we protect ourselves from the bad influences in the world and from the culture surrounding us, we are always in danger of allowing these things to corrupt our faith and lead us astray.

How can we protect ourselves from the negative influences that are always around us? What personal choices must you, and you alone, make for yourself to help limit the negative impact of these influences on you?

The Lesson in Brief

▶ **Key Text:** *Hebrews 6:18, 19*

▶ **The Student Will:**

Know: Recognize that the provisions made for the servants of the sacrificial services included cities of refuge for murderers.

Feel: Acknowledge the need to flee to Christ for refuge.

Do: Take advantage of the provisions of refuge God has provided.

▶ **Lesson Outline:**

I. Know: Cities of Refuge

A Not only were cities and pastures allotted to the Levites and evenly scattered among the holdings of the different tribes, but the cities of refuge were evenly distributed among the Levite cities. How does this plan of distribution illustrate God's plan for the distribution of His blessings?

B What provisions were made for those involved in manslaughter and murder, and what were their responsibilities in the use of these provisions?

C How was the community involved in this system of justice?

II. Feel: The Presence of Christ, Our Refuge

Though the cities of refuge were to be used by those accused of murder, these symbols illustrate our critical need of refuge in Christ. How does this illustrate the seriousness of our sin?

III. Do: Abiding in Our Place of Safety

A The murderers were not only to hurry to the city of refuge, but they were to stay there, on pain of death. How does this illustrate our relationship to Christ?

B How can we, as a royal priesthood in God's service today, offer ourselves as places of refuge and intercession for those around us who are suffering?

▶ **Summary:** Not only were the Levites living among Israel to remind them of God's spiritual gifts for them, but their cities of refuge further illustrated lessons about God's justice and mediation.

Cities of the Levites

It will be remembered that, because of the Levites' loyalty at Sinai, they were to be rewarded. God was to be their portion. Nevertheless, the Lord made specific provisions for them and how they were to live among the people they were to serve.

What provision was made for the Levites? What does this teach us about how the Levites were to live? *Num. 35:1–8.*

Notice, too, how the land was to be given to them from all the tribes. Those who had been given a lot of land were to give up more than those who had been given less. Hence, fairness in the land allocation is again seen. And yet, all the tribes were to give of “the inheritance of their possession” (*vs. 2*). All were to take part in making sure that the Levites were provided for. Thus, the Lord clearly wanted them to know their obligations. In a sense, the principle of tithing works the same way. Those who have a lot will, by default, tithe more than those who have less.

At the same time, too, the fact that they were to be provided for by the other tribes certainly must have been a constant reminder to the Levites of their responsibility to do their work faithfully in behalf of the people.

The Levites, then, were to be scattered among all the tribes of Israel; that is, they weren't gathered in one specific area. They were to live among the people, perhaps as a reminder of the faithfulness of their fathers during the worship of the golden calf. Hence, ideally, they in their sacred roles could be a constant witness to the people of what faithfulness and holiness should be about. Living among them, being part of their communities, sharing in their struggles, sorrows, and joys, the Levites—had they been faithful to their task—could have been a blessing to the nation. They were not to be some exclusive, elite, arrogant class that lived apart from the community in which they served. They were to serve, not be served. What an example of what true ministry is all about.

Read Ephesians 2. What does this tell us about what it means to be part of a community of believers? How can we best fit into our community and fulfill whatever roles we are called to?

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate**

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: Throughout history Jesus is our refuge.

Just for Teachers: How often we have heard that we have nothing to fear except that we forget how God has led in the past?


As the Hebrews neared Canaan, Moses recounted the stages of the journey. Each stage would be a reminder of God's leading, presaging the more detailed record of Deuteronomy. This record was the birth of the promised people traveling to a promised land. God's hand could be seen at each stage: the miracles of the Red Sea crossing, the water coming from a rock, the building of the tabernacle, and the daily manna; but there were also solemn warnings in the revolt of Korah and the plague of snakes. Who could forget the bronze snake and the look of faith that saved? Now at the borders of Canaan another emblem of salvation is added: cities of refuge. Here was a remedy for those who had sinned but had *not* done so out of premeditated malice.

Christ is the refuge of all sinners. He is the Bread of Life, the Light of the world, the Sacrifice on the altar. It is astonishing to note just how many of the foundational metaphors for Christ's ministry emerged during this short 40-year span.

Activity: Sing the hymn "Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah." The teacher may open by sharing how Christ has been his or her refuge, speaking of *specific events* or answered prayers that demonstrate God's active care. Invite others to share how God has been his or her refuge (recalling specific times and events). Next, ask members to recall specific events during Israel's exodus and wilderness travels that showed God's active care and mercy. Consider events that served as solemn warnings. Now discuss how God preserved Jesus' life from the time prior to His birth up to His infancy.

► **STEP 2—Explore**

Bible Commentary

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Cities of Refuge

Read Numbers 35:6, 9–12. What is being established here, and why?

At this time in ancient Israel, no system of justice operated. If a man accidentally or on purpose killed a man, the victim's nearest of kin became his "avenger of blood" (*Deut. 19:12*) to execute justice. To prevent a miscarriage of justice, a system of six Levitical cities (three on each side of the Jordan) were appointed to which the murderer could flee for safety (*Josh. 20:1–7*).

Numbers 35:12, though, brings out an important point. Fleeing to the city automatically didn't guarantee permanent asylum. In some cases it would be a temporary refuge "until he stands before the congregation in judgment" (*NKJV*). That is, until the facts of the case could be established. These cities did not provide some kind of permanent diplomatic immunity, in which today a diplomat can commit a crime in a host country and not be held accountable. In this case, these cities were set up in order to prevent what could be a miscarriage of justice.

Read Numbers 35:9–21. How do we understand this form of justice in light of the gospel?

Some people don't understand how something like this could be reconciled with Bible texts about forgiveness or turning the other cheek. But what we are dealing with here is a criminal code. The gospel of forgiveness and grace, as taught by Christ, doesn't mean that crime, especially something as heinous as murder, goes unpunished by society. That a killer might even repent before God is, really, a different matter. What society can function if crime is not punished? What we see here is God's way of making sure that one of the worst crimes, that of murder, is dealt with in a fair and just manner.

Suppose you know someone whose family member has been murdered, and the accused, unquestionably guilty, is convicted. The family, who are Christians, can have a say in the sentence, either death or life in prison. What would you advise them, and why? Bring your answer to class on Sabbath.

Learning Cycle CONTINUED**I. Cities of the Levites** (Review Num. 35:1–8 with the class.)

After priestly functions were conferred on the tribe of Levi, life was never the same. Unlike their brother tribesmen, Levites were not given land. Perhaps God withheld this privilege so that acquiring wealth would not tempt them to abandon their spiritual purpose. Their inheritance was the Lord, and they were to satisfy their temporal needs through His service.


Nevertheless, the Levites would need a place to live, a place for their livestock and their gardens. God ordained that the other tribes would deed small tracts of land surrounding 48 cities to meet this need. The provision was proportionate—larger tribes supplying more towns, smaller tribes supplying fewer. The natural consequence of this arrangement was that the spiritual leadership of Israel was scattered throughout the nation rather than concentrated in one place.

Consider This: What responsibility does the church have in supplying the temporal needs of its spiritual leaders? How should the church deal with spiritual leaders who appear to subvert their spiritual purpose to the pursuit of wealth? How can the principles of proportion and decentralization be applied to today’s spiritual leadership?

II. Cities of Refuge—Christ, Our Refuge (Review Num. 35:6–34; 2 Sam. 22:3; John 8:10, 11; Eph. 1:7; Col. 1:14; Heb. 6:18 with the class.)

Sin, including the heinous crime of murder, was not merely a personal matter but constituted a corporate offense to a holy God. The Hebrews were, therefore, admonished not to tolerate the “pollution” of the land inflicted by “bloodshed.” This pollution “defiled” the land and required “atonement.” Because a holy God lived among His people, they were to maintain a “holy” environment for Him. The presence of God is thus set forth as the primary motive for holy living.

In his classic work *Christian Storytelling*, A. W. Spalding shares a legend

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Cites of Refuge, Continued

Read Numbers 35:22–34 and answer the following questions:

- How was the whole congregation involved in dealing with these situations? Why would it be important for them to be involved?

- What distinction was made between premeditated murder and that of manslaughter?

- Even though the death might have been by accident, the perpetrator still had to remain in the city of refuge in order to be protected. Given the context, why do you think that was so?

- All through the book of Numbers we have seen example after example of God’s supernatural intervention, especially in cases of apostasy, sin, and rebellion. That being the case, why do you think the Lord set up this system of justice, in which humans were responsible for determining guilt and innocence? Why didn’t He just supernaturally administer justice, as He did in other cases?

- Why do you think a murderer couldn’t be put to death on the testimony of just one witness? What does that say about how serious the issue regarding capital punishment was?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED


that was printed in the *Review and Herald*, entitled “The Hermit and the King” (reprinted by Pacific Press® Publishing Association, 1966). At the start of the story, the king visits a hermit who lives in squalor. As he repeatedly returns to visit, the hermit, motivated by the king’s return, is gradually transformed from a slum dweller to the gracious owner of a beautiful mountain retreat. God’s presence is that powerful.

However, zeal to preserve the land as holy was to be balanced by mercy for those who might accidentally take life. For this reason six cities of refuge were created. Those innocent of murder might flee to the safety of their walls and find refuge. A trial would follow to determine the facts of specific cases. Those found innocent of premeditated killing would be spared as long as they stayed in the confines of the city. (Those judged guilty would be stoned.) However, when the high priest died, the killer was free. Although the killer was considered innocent of murder, only another death could expiate the slain person’s blood. The high priest’s death provided that ritual atonement.

Consider This: Whose death and whose freedom were prefigured by the high priest’s death and the killer’s release? If the killing was unintentional, why was it necessary for the killer to stay in the city instead of returning to his home immediately? What is it about the heavenly High Priest’s ministry that releases us from the clutches of sin? How does this system of justice emphasize the importance and sanctity of life for God? Which modern issues and practices should be informed by the value that God places on life?

► **STEP 3—Apply**

Just for Teachers: No earthly city (however glorious), no cattle sacrifice (regardless of size), no human priest (however dedicated), no sacred rite that humans devise, could in the end provide atonement for sin. Christ is the sinner’s only hope, the only true refuge.

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Christ, Our Refuge

“The God of my rock; in him will I trust: he is my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my high tower, and my refuge, my saviour; thou savest me from violence” (2 Sam. 22:3).

How does 2 Samuel 22:3 reflect, at least somewhat, what the cities of refuge provided?

In what ways do we find the same kind of refuge and protection in Christ that those who fled to the cities of refuge found? *See John 8:10, 11; Eph. 1:7; Col. 1:14; Heb. 6:18.*

“The cities of refuge appointed for God’s ancient people were a symbol of the refuge provided in Christ. The same merciful Saviour who appointed those temporal cities of refuge has by the shedding of His own blood provided for the transgressors of God’s law a sure retreat, into which they may flee for safety from the second death. No power can take out of His hands the souls that go to Him for pardon. ‘There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus.’ ‘Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us;’ that ‘we might have a strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us.’ Romans 8:1, 34; Hebrews 6:18.

“He who fled to the city of refuge could make no delay. Family and employment were left behind. There was no time to say farewell to loved ones. His life was at stake, and every other interest must be sacrificed to the one purpose—to reach the place of safety. Weariness was forgotten, difficulties were unheeded. The fugitive dared not for one moment slacken his pace until he was within the wall of the city.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, pp. 516, 517.

At the same time, the parallel is not exact, because our understanding of the Cross is that even those who have committed premeditated sin, even murder, can be forgiven by the Lord.

Do you feel that you are not good enough to be saved? Do you feel that your sins are too great for you to be accepted by God? Do you feel that you are unworthy of forgiveness? If so, then why is it important to forget about how you feel and claim the promises of forgiveness, salvation, and acceptance offered to you by Jesus?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

Activity: Distribute hymnals to the class and invite them to study the text of the Christmas hymns and carols. Ask them to search for phrases that relate to the ways in which Christ is our refuge, the atonement for our sin. Keep a master list for the class on a marker board or poster board. Do not overlook the lesser-known songs.

Encourage the members to say how the phrases or concepts (ransom, reconciliation, freedom, cleansing, and others) of a selected song apply to their own lives.

► STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: While skeptics may debate the reliability of the biblical record and deny God's existence, there is one thing they cannot gainsay: the believer's personal testimony of what God has done in their lives. Apologetic arguments are valuable, sound reasoning is God's gift, but none of these can replace the simple statement of what God is doing for you. If the purpose and mission of the church are to make disciples, there can be nothing more important than this: that we express clearly what God has done and what that means to us.

Activity: This project makes a good "homework" assignment, but, depending on the amount of time allotted for study, it may be completed in class. Pass out writing paper and invite members to write a paragraph or longer statement about how God has been their refuge. This paragraph is their personal testimony of God's working in their lives. Themes may include a personal search for meaning, a quest for companionship, physical healing, financial prosperity, deliverance from addictions, safety from violence, family reconciliation, academic achievement, a search for truth, finding peace, employment, and more. Focus attention on God's promises, answered prayer, and forgiveness for, and deliverance from, sin. Conclude the study with a song such as "If You But Trust in God to Guide You" or "A Mighty Fortress" or another song that emphasizes faith and trust in Christ our Refuge.

Further Study: Ellen G. White, “The Division of Canaan,” pp. 510–520, in *Patriarchs and Prophets*.

“The sinner is exposed to eternal death, until he finds a hiding place in Christ; and as loitering and carelessness might rob the fugitive of his only chance for life, so delays and indifference may prove the ruin of the soul. Satan, the great adversary, is on the track of every transgressor of God’s holy law, and he who is not sensible of his danger, and does not earnestly seek shelter in the eternal refuge, will fall a prey to the destroyer.

“The prisoner who at any time went outside the city of refuge was abandoned to the avenger of blood. Thus the people were taught to adhere to the methods which infinite wisdom appointed for their security. Even so, it is not enough that the sinner believe in Christ for the pardon of sin; he must, by faith and obedience, abide in Him.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 517.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ In class, discuss your answer to Tuesday’s question regarding the death penalty. What would you tell the family, and why? Also, is it right and fair to apply what was done in ancient Israel to our system of justice today? Discuss.
- ❷ Why is it so important to remember how the Lord has led us in the past, either as individuals or as a church? What dangers arise if we forget the past? At the same time, why is it important not to dwell too much on what already has been done and cannot be changed? How can we strike the right balance here?
- ❸ If someone were to ask you, “What does it mean to take refuge in Christ?” what would you answer? How do we “take refuge” in the Lord? What does that mean? How should it change our lives?
- ❹ How do we administer church discipline today? How do we deal with wayward members whose actions are a reproach to the Lord? Yet, at the same time, how do we deal with them in a way that does not make us appear judgmental? Or can we?

Summary: The children of Israel, on the borders of the Promised Land, are given a quick summary of how God has led them all those years. Just before they enter, the Lord establishes the cities of refuge, places of asylum that, in a unique way, represent the refuge that we, as sinners, can find in Christ.