

## Cities of Refuge (Safety)



### SABBATH—DECEMBER 19

**READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON:** Numbers 33–36; Joshua 20:1–7; Ephesians 2.

**MEMORY VERSE:** “We have run away from everything else to take hold of the hope offered to us in God’s promise. So God gave his promise and his oath. Those two things can’t [cannot] change. He couldn’t [could not] lie about them. Our hope is certain. It is something for the soul to hold on to. It is strong and secure [safe]” (Hebrews 6:18, 19, NlrV).

**GOD WAS FAITHFUL IN DOING ALL THAT HE HAD PROMISED.** But the nation (the first generation<sup>1</sup>) proved unfaithful. They did not inherit (receive) the land offered. Instead, they died in a harsh wilderness<sup>2</sup> on the wrong side of the Jordan River. It was the side they were to have fled from and not to have died in. How sad, because it did not need to happen. They had been given so much. God had done so much for them. And yet, still they refused to trust. They refused to act in faith even though they had experienced wonderful miracles<sup>3</sup> of God’s power. These were miracles that most of us never have seen and, at least in this life, probably never will.

But the Lord was not finished. No way! The theme (idea; topic) of the Bible, again and again, is that God will fulfill (keep) His promises. The Lord will have His saved 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 refused to enter into the promises given them?

This week is our last week in Numbers. We will study some of the final preparations as the children of Israel get ready to go into the Promised Land.

1. generation—all the people born about the same time. Your parents belong to one generation. You and your friends who are your age belong to another generation.

2. wilderness—an area in which few people live that is not used for farming and is more or less in its natural state.

3. miracles—extraordinary (amazing; great) events believed to be signs of the power of God. Examples of miracles are Peter’s walking on water and Jesus’ raising Lazarus from the dead.

**SUNDAY—DECEMBER 20****HISTORY LESSON (Numbers 33)**

**According to Numbers 33, why do you think the Lord had Moses write down their “starting points, stage (step) by stage (step)”? What purpose could that serve?**

It is really an unbelievable history! An entire nation escapes its slave masters (Egypt) after hundreds of years of suffering. It survives for four decades. It wanders in the unfriendly and dry Sinai wilderness. Only the grace<sup>4</sup> and power and miracles of God could have made surviving this time possible. Notice, too, how Numbers 33:2, KJV, shows that they moved from place to place “by the commandment of the Lord.” The Lord wanted them, and future generations, never to forget who was behind the whole story. The Hebrew people on the move in the wilderness was, really, the story about how God worked to save sinful humans (people) and bring them into the Promised Land.

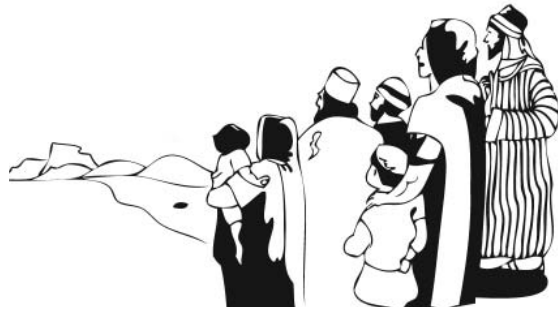
The story about Israel’s wanderings is powerful. Today there are Bible thinkers who do not deny the fact that a group of ex-slaves left Egypt. But they think that these happenings just happened naturally. These thinkers forget that God was responsible for all that had happened.

**What important spiritual principle (rule) is found in Numbers**

**33:50–56? Keep in mind what happened to Israel after they had settled the land. Why, then, was this commandment about dealing with these peoples so important?**

Sadly, giving in to the ways of the world is still a problem for the Lord’s people. We must protect ourselves from the bad influences<sup>5</sup> in the world. Otherwise, we will be in danger of letting these things weaken our faith and lead us astray.

How can we protect ourselves from the negative influences around us? What personal choices must you make to help limit their effect on you?



**The Hebrew people on the move in the wilderness is really the story of how God works to save sinners and bring them into the Promised Land.**

**MONDAY—DECEMBER 21****CITIES OF THE LEVITES<sup>6</sup>  
(Numbers 35:1–8)**

The Levites were loyal to God at Sinai. For this reason, they were to be rewarded. What God received in

4. grace—God’s gift of forgiveness and mercy (kindness) that He freely gives us to take away our sins.

5. influences—people or things that have the power to change or affect others.

6. Levites—people of the priestly tribe (group) of Levi.

tithes<sup>7</sup> went to the Levites. But the Lord made special plans for them and how they were to live among the people they were to serve.

**What gifts were given to the Levites? What do these gifts in Numbers 35:1–8 teach us about how the Levites were to live?**

Notice how the land was to be given to the Levites 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. So, again we find fairness in the way the land gifts are divided. And still *all* the tribes were to give of “their inheritance.”<sup>8</sup> All were to take part in making sure that the Levites were taken care of. The Lord clearly wanted the people to know their responsibilities (duties). In a way, the principle of tithing<sup>9</sup> works the same way. Those who have a lot will tithe more than those who have less.

At the same time, the Levites were to be cared for by the other tribes. In this way, it was a reminder to the Levites of their responsibility to do their work faithfully for the people.

The Levites were to be scattered among all the tribes of Israel. They were not gathered together in only one area. The Levites were to live among the people. Perhaps, the Levites were meant to be a reminder of the faithfulness of their fathers

during the worship of the golden calf. In this way, while they went about doing their holy work, their work was a never-ending witness to the people. It showed what faithfulness and holiness should be about. The Levites lived among the people. They were part of their towns and lives. They shared in their struggles, sorrows, and joys. If the Levites had been faithful to their work, they could have been a blessing to the nation. They were not to be some snobbish class who lived separately from the people they served. They were to serve the people, not to be served by them. What an example of what true ministry (work done for God) is all about.



**The Levites were to live among the people and to serve them.**

**What does Ephesians 2 tell us about what it means to be part of a community (group) of believers? How can we best fit into our community and do whatever roles we are called to?**

7. tithes—the money we are to pay back to God. God asks us to give Him one-tenth of all we earn.

8. inheritance—the belongings of a dead person that are given to a living person.

9. tithing—giving back to God one-tenth of what one earns.

**TUESDAY—DECEMBER 22****CITIES OF REFUGE (SAFETY)  
(Numbers 35:6, 9–12)****What is being set up in Numbers 35:6, 9–12, and why?**

At this time in Israel, no system of justice was in place. If a man accidentally or on purpose killed a man, the victim's nearest relative could become a killer (Deuteronomy 19:12) to get even. To prevent any injustice that might happen, a system of six Levitical cities (three on each side of the Jordan) were chosen. A murderer could flee to one of the six cities for safety (Joshua 20:1–7).



**A murderer could flee for safety to one of the cities of refuge.**

Numbers 35:12 brings out an important point. Fleeing to the city did not mean a person would be protected forever. In some cases, the city would be a short-term refuge (safety) until

he stood before the judges of the people. But first the people needed time to learn all the facts of his case. These cities did not offer unending safety. Today a diplomat<sup>10</sup> can commit (do) a crime in the country he is serving in and get away with it. But in this case, these cities were set up to prevent people from judging someone's case unfairly.

**How does the form of justice in Numbers 35:9–21 compare<sup>11</sup> with the gospel?<sup>12</sup>**

Some people have trouble accepting these verses. They do not find the forgiveness of the gospel in them. But here we are dealing with crime. True, Christ taught the gospel of forgiveness and grace. But that does not mean that crime, such as murder, goes unpunished by society.<sup>13</sup> How can society work if crime is not punished? This is God's way of making sure that one of the worst crimes, that of murder, is judged in a fair and just manner.

**Suppose you know someone whose family member has been murdered, and the accused was charged as guilty. 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.**

10. diplomat—a person who is sent to a foreign nation to act on behalf of his country's government and interests.

11. compare—to show how two or more things are the same.

12. gospel—the good news that Jesus saves us from our sins; the good news about salvation.

13. society—people living together as a group, or forming a group, with the same way of life.

**WEDNESDAY—DECEMBER 23****CITIES OF REFUGE (SAFETY),  
CONTINUED (Numbers 35:22–34)**

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

- How was the whole congregation (group) involved in dealing with these situations? Why would it be important for them to be involved?
- What special difference was made between premeditated (planned beforehand) murder and that of manslaughter (murder by accident)?
- The death might have been by accident. But the person who did it still had to remain in the city of refuge to be protected. Why do you think that was so?
- All through the book of Numbers, we find example after example of God’s stepping in to save and judge His people. He steps in again and again in cases of backsliding, sin, and rebellion (war against God). So, if that is the case, why do you think the Lord set up this system of justice where humans (people) decided guilt and innocence? Why did He not just step in again and give justice, as He did at other times?
- Why do you think a murderer was not to be put to death based on the word of just one wit-

ness? What does that say about how serious putting someone to death was?

**THURSDAY—DECEMBER 24****CHRIST, OUR REFUGE (SAFETY  
AND PROTECTION)  
(2 Samuel 22:3)**

“ ‘My God is my rock. I go to him for safety. He is like a shield to me. He’s [He is] the power that saves me. He’s [He is] my place of safety. I go to him for help. He’s [He is] my Savior’ ” (2 Samuel 22:3, NIV).

How does 2 Samuel 22:3 show what the cities of refuge offered?

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? Read also John 8:10, 11; Ephesians 1:7; Colossians 1:14; Hebrews 6:18.

“The cities of refuge were set up to protect God’s people. They were a symbol<sup>14</sup> of the refuge given in Christ. The merciful Savior [Christ] set up those earthly cities of refuge. The same Savior has shed His own blood to give those who break God’s law a safe place to hide. The lawbreakers may flee there for safety from the second death. No one can take out of His hands the souls that go to Him for pardon.<sup>15</sup> ‘Those who belong

14. symbol—an object, mark, sign, or person that stands for, or means the same thing as, another object, idea, or thing.

15. pardon—freedom from punishment for wrongdoing.



to Christ Jesus are no longer under God's [death] sentence' (Romans 8:1, [NirV]). 'Who can sentence us to death? Christ Jesus is at the right hand of God and is also praying for us' (Romans 8:34, [NirV]). 'We have run away from everything else to take hold of the hope offered to us in God's promise' (Hebrews 6:18, [NirV]).

"He who fled to the city of refuge could not delay. Family and work were left behind. There was no time to say Goodbye to loved ones. His life was at risk. Everything must be sacrificed [given up] to the one purpose—to reach the place of safety. Being tired was forgotten. Difficulties were ignored. The runaway dared not for one moment to slow down until he was safe inside the wall of the city."—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*,<sup>16</sup> pages 516, 517.

True, the city of refuge is not a perfect symbol of the Cross. But it teaches us that even those who have planned and carried out 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,<sup>17</sup> and acceptance offered to you by Jesus?**



The runaway dared not for one moment slow down until he was safe inside the walls of the city.

### FRIDAY—DECEMBER 25

**ADDITIONAL STUDY:** Ellen G. White, "The Division of Canaan," pages 510–517, in *Patriarchs and Prophets*.

"The sinner is in danger of eternal [forever; without end] death, until he finds a hiding place in Christ. Wasting time and being careless might steal from the sinner his only chance for life. In the same way, putting off a coming to Christ may prove the ruin of the soul. Satan, the great enemy, is right behind every lawbreaker of God's holy law and is closing in fast. Any person who is not aware of his or her danger, and who does not seek shelter in the eternal refuge [safety] of Christ, will fall into Satan's trap.

"The prisoner who at any time went outside the city of refuge was at the mercy of the person who was chasing

16. *Patriarchs and Prophets*—patriarchs were leaders of God's people in early Bible times, such as Abraham and Isaac, or other leaders of Israel, such as Moses; prophets are men or women who are given messages by God to give to His people.

17. salvation—God's plan for saving sinners from eternal (without end) death; the gift of eternal life; being saved.

him. So, the people were taught to follow God's methods [plans]. These plans were designed by God's wisdom for their security [safety and protection]. Even so, it is not enough for the sinner to just believe in Christ for the pardon of sin. He must, by faith and obedience, remain in Him."—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, page 517.

#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- ❶ In class, discuss your answer to Tuesday's question about the death penalty. What would you tell the family, and why? Also, is it right and fair to make use of Israel's system in 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 persons or as a church? What dangers arise if we forget the past? At the same time, why is it important not to "remember too much" of what has already been done and cannot be changed? How can we keep the right balance here?
- ❸ If someone were to ask you, "What does it mean to take refuge (safety) 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 give church discipline<sup>18</sup> today? How do we deal with backsliding members whose actions are an insult to the Lord? But, at the same time, how do we deal with them in a way that does not seem harsh or critical?

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18. discipline—punishment that helps God's people obey and be more faithful.

