



GRACE IN CITY GATES

SERIES: IMAGES OF WARFARE AND WORSHIP

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Joshua 20:1-21:45

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The world in which we live and conduct our business is anti-God. Most of what we see and experience daily has the effect of drawing us away from God, not toward him. The world doesn't give us daily reminders of who God is, what he thinks or how he operates. On the contrary, we are continually faced with our inadequacies, with the result that we often try to compensate for what we lack, using ungodly methods in the process.

Things were very different for Israel in the Old Testament. For them, life in the land was filled with constant reminders of God's presence and sovereign activity among them—things like memorial stones, altars, heaps of rocks, a tabernacle, and later, a temple. All of these visual aids reminded the nation of the wonder and grace of God.

This concept of images and metaphors is a recurring theme in the book of Joshua. Today, we come to chapters 20 and 21 in our studies. This section of the book is unfamiliar material to most. We would not expect to spend a lot of time studying these chapters, yet they are quite intriguing in that they refer to two categories of special cities in the land, places which helped Israel learn more about God. As we will see, chapter 20 deals with the cities of refuge, and chapter 21 with the Levitical cities.

The book of Joshua is a carefully designed and structured narrative. In the opening 12 chapters we saw that the land was given to Israel; and in chapters 13-21 that it was divided among the people. The end of chapter 21 has a summary statement declaring that everything that God had promised Israel had been fulfilled: "So the LORD gave Israel all the land which He had sworn to give to their fathers" (21:43).

Here in chapters 20 and 21, however, we find that some of the land is given back to God as a tithe. This tithe consists of cities which were given to support the needs of the entire community. The conditions and requirements for these cities had already been carefully delineated by God to Moses and recorded in the Torah. While these places represent a detailed and practical design by God for life in the land, they also present to Israel a constant reminder that God was living amongst them. As we come to our text, it is my prayer that we might see the relevance of these accounts to our own lives.

Let's begin by reading chapter 20 together.

Then the LORD spoke to Joshua, saying, "Speak to the sons of Israel, saying, 'Designate the cities of

refuge, of which I spoke to you through Moses, that the manslayer who kills any person unintentionally, without premeditation, may flee there, and they shall become your refuge from the avenger of blood. And he shall flee to one of these cities, and shall stand at the entrance of the gate of the city and state his case in the hearing of the elders of that city; and they shall take him into the city to them and give him a place, so that he may dwell among them. Now if the avenger of blood pursues him, then they shall not deliver the manslayer into his hand, because he struck his neighbor without premeditation and did not hate him beforehand. And he shall dwell in that city until he stands before the congregation for judgment, until the death of the one who is high priest in those days. Then the manslayer shall return to his own city and to his own house, to the city from which he fled.' "

So they set apart Kedesh in Galilee in the hill country of Naphtali and Shechem in the hill country of Ephraim, and Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron) in the hill country of Judah. And beyond the Jordan east of Jericho, they designated Bezer in the wilderness on the plain from the tribe of Reuben, and Ramoth in Gilead from the tribe of Gad, and Golan in Bashan from the tribe of Manasseh. These were the appointed cities for all the sons of Israel and for the stranger who sojourns among them, that whoever kills any person unintentionally may flee there, and not die by the hand of the avenger of blood until he stands before the congregation. (Josh. 20:1-9, NASB)

Six cities, three lying east of the Jordan and three west of the river, were designated as cities of refuge. The instructions for these cities, which are quite detailed, are given in Deut. 4 and 19, Num. 35 and Exod. 21. These locations were set aside to provide protection for anyone who took the life of another by accident. We find an illustration of this very thing in these words from the book of Deuteronomy: "Now this is the case of the manslayer who may flee there and live: when he kills his friend unintentionally, not hating him previously—as when a man goes into the forest with his friend to cut wood, and his hand swings the axe to cut down the tree, and the iron head slips off the handle and strikes his friend so that he dies—he may flee to one of these cities and live" (Deut. 19:4-5).

In the event of an accidental death, therefore, the one who shed blood "unintentionally" (through error), and

“without knowledge” (without premeditation) could flee to one of these cities of refuge, which were located so that one could flee to them in a day’s travel. The family of the deceased would then select an “avenger of blood” (in Hebrew: *go’el*), the closest male relative of the one slain, whose task it was to restore the balance in family relations. Retribution, not vengeance, was the purpose behind this. The avenger was not expected to make a distinction between intentional and unintentional slaying. Following the accidental killing, the manslayer would flee to the nearest city of refuge, pursued by the avenger.

Upon the manslayer’s arrival at the city, the elders, all of whom were Levites (since these were Levitical cities), held a preliminary trial at the city gate, the place where court was held in ancient Israel. If the manslayer was found innocent, they granted him asylum from the avenger of blood and sent him to stand trial before the assembly, a sort of parliament with judicial powers. If he was found guilty at the preliminary trial, he would be delivered over to the avenger of blood.

Later there would be a more formal trial. It is unclear where this trial before the assembly was staged, whether it was held in the city where the homicide occurred or the place where asylum was granted. If the assembly found him guilty, he was handed over to the family protector for execution; if he was found innocent, he was taken back to the city of refuge. Thus the city of refuge was like a prison. If the manslayer left the city borders, then the avenger could kill him and not be found guilty of murder. Upon the death of the high priest, the manslayer was free to return to his home. These laws and procedures applied not only to the native born, but also to the stranger, the sojourner. Israel had a universal code of justice

The guiding concern behind all of this ritual was the shedding of blood in the land. Innocent blood must find satisfaction. The Lord inquires into and vindicates innocent blood (Gen. 4:10-11; 9:5-6; 2 Sam. 16:7-8). “So innocent blood will not be shed in the midst of your land which the LORD your God gives you as an inheritance, and bloodguiltiness be on you” (Deut. 19:10). Homicidal blood had the effect of polluting the land. It called forth judgment both by the Lord and by the family protector who was obliged to seek justice, not revenge, for his family. “So you shall not pollute the land in which you are; for blood pollutes the land and no expiation can be made for the land for the blood that is shed on it, except by the blood of him who shed it” (Num. 35:33).

Thus, innocent blood was expiated either by the death of the murderer or by atonement (Deut. 21:7-9); otherwise it brought upon the land the Lord’s wrath. Initially, those found not guilty of homicide could seek asylum at the altar, but those who killed with premeditation would be dragged from the altar and executed (Exod. 21:12-14). Deut. 21:9 says: “So you shall remove the guilt of innocent blood from your midst, when you do what is right in the eyes of the LORD.”

So, the shedding of innocent blood is a matter of extreme importance to God. We know this from the Genesis account. When Cain killed his brother Abel, the voice of Abel’s blood cried out to God from the ground.

The significance of these cities can be demonstrated on three levels. First, life is extremely valuable and it should be protected.

God places a high premium on human life, because he created man in his own image. In Israel, where capital punishment was practiced, murderers could not avoid justice, and the responsibility for implementing justice was shared by all the people in the land (although in light of our Lord’s teaching in the Sermon on the Mount we might alter our view). However, capital punishment, when it is correctly understood, guards the sanctity of human life. Murder, in contrast, has the effect of cheapening human life. It is an outrage. Any time we devalue or dishonor another human being, we dishonor God.

As I studied this text last week, I thought about the issue of abortion. Can there be any doubt that one day God will pour forth his wrath on our society over this shedding of innocent blood? I thought also of the killing of the thirteen-year-old girl, Christina Williams, in Monterey, which has caused widespread grief among the community. Her innocent blood cries out to God. The value of human life should affect the way we interact with society: how we relate to others, how we conduct business, how we treat our neighbor, even how we drive our cars. Human life is a most precious commodity. Yet, tragically, we often value material things more than people.

On a second level, Christ is a city where we can find a place of refuge.

As manslaughterers could find safety and protection in the cities of refuge, Jesus is the city of refuge for believers. He is the place where we can run to when death is pursuing us.

These cities of refuge have at least four interesting parallels to Jesus. For one thing, they were very accessible. According to Deut. 19, roads were built to these cities, bridges built over ravines, etc., so that fugitives could take the shortest possible route to safety. And these roads were carefully repaired each spring. At every crossroads, a special sign was erected, which read, “Refuge! Refuge!” in letters so large that someone who was running could read them without stopping.

Second, the doors of the cities of refuge always remained unlocked, in contrast to the doors of other cities which were locked to protect residents from robbers and vandals. In times of war, the gates were always locked, but not so the cities of refuge. Third, the cities of refuge were not only for Jews but for people of all races. And fourth, if we wander outside the boundaries of the city, death pursues us.

For Christians, Jesus is a city of refuge. He is accessible. The way is always open so anyone can come. Jesus

expands the idea of the city of refuge, because we can come to him when we are guilty or innocent. And, unlike the city of refuge, we do not have to run a great distance to find shelter, because Christ is a refuge who is always available. We are to be diligent to build bridges, repair roads and make signs to show that anyone who is lost or in trouble might find the way to salvation. Thus, the cities of refuge here in Joshua were a reminder of the coming Messiah. Following the first service this morning, Bernard Bell told me the story of Don Richardson, a missionary to a remote cannibal tribe. It seems that if one stood in a certain area in this tribe's territory, a place that was marked out by a circle of stones, his life was protected. It was from this safe place that Don Richardson was able to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ to this tribe.

Now the third level: The most strikingly significant thing about the city of refuge is that it provided a constant reminder of the notion of substitutionary death and satisfaction for innocent blood. We see this in the death of the high priest and the idea of an avenger of blood.

The concept of substitutionary death is evident in the person of the high priest. A manslayer's life was protected in the city of refuge, yet he was imprisoned, essentially, confined within the walls of the city. However, when the high priest died, the manslayer could return to his home. The high priest, who was Israel's chief representative before God, was anointed with oil. His death atoned for innocent blood. His life was substituted for another.

According to the book of Hebrews, Jesus is our high priest. He was anointed with oil. His death satisfied God's justice for innocent blood, setting us free from the prison of our sin, whether it was intentional or not.

But we also see the concept of substitutionary death in the person of the avenger of blood. This time there is a slight twist, however. The human race is locked in sin and destined for death. There is no way of escape except through Christ. In Adam, "sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned" (Rom 5:12). But God selected a *go'el*, his own Son, an avenger of blood, to accomplish retribution. However, this *go'el* came not to judge but to save. Instead of taking our lives, he gave his life for us. Instead of killing, he was killed. Instead of taking blood, he shed his blood. Jesus was a *go'el* like no one had ever seen or imagined. His blood provides justice for the innocent blood that we shed. In Christ, God's justice was satisfied, as it must be. What an incredible twist to this whole process that God had established in Israel!

What intrigues me about this whole concept of cities of refuge is that in them we keep seeing Jesus. Jesus is the city. He is the high priest. He is the *go'el* who exchanged places with the manslayer. The recurring theme is that we are alive because of the substitutionary death of Another. In these cities, Israel had a constant,

daily reminder of this spiritual truth.

This is the gospel in its purest form, isn't it? Substitutionary death forms the whole basis of our life in Christ. What is the basis of your life? What is the lens through which you see God, yourself, your sin, your family, and the world? If we don't begin with the cross, then everything we do will be skewed. We will build on the wrong foundation. Jesus was an avenger of blood who traded places with us. He paid the cost for the innocent blood that we shed. What a glorious gospel we are privileged to share!

The world does not model this, of course. The world proclaims that we should strengthen ourselves in the face of our inadequacies; lay blame in the face of our guilt; and promote ourselves at the expense of others in the face of our weaknesses. But Jesus laid down his life for ours, and now he asks us to lay down our lives for others. So, in these cities Israel had a reminder built into the very fabric of their everyday life that pointed them to the idea of substitutionary death, one that looked forward to the cross.

The Levitical cities that we find discussed in chapter 21 are equally as intriguing.

Then the heads of the households of the Levites approached Eleazar the priest and Joshua the son of Nun and the heads of households of the tribes of the sons of Israel. And they spoke to them at Shiloh in the land of Canaan, saying, "The LORD commanded through Moses to give us cities to live in, with their pasture lands for our cattle." So the sons of Israel gave the Levites from their inheritance these cities with their pasture lands, according to the command of the LORD (Josh. 21:1-3).

This chapter lists forty-eight cities that were given by the twelve tribes to the descendants of Levi. If you remember, Levi and Simeon had no inheritance in the land because of their massacre of the Shechemites, recorded in Genesis 34. Simeon was given places to live within the territory of Judah; and Moses promised the Levites forty-eight cities spread throughout the land. Twelve tribes received territory in the land because Joseph's two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, were each given a full inheritance.

These forty-eight cities were allotted to the three branches of Levi. He had three sons, Kohath, Gershon, and Merari. Aaron was a descendant of Kohath and his sons were priests. The forty-eight cities included the six cities of refuge. Included also were the pasture lands necessary to support the community. Each of the twelve tribes gave up approximately four cities together with pasture lands to support the Levites. The idea of allotment emphasized that it was the Lord who assigned these places. The family of Aaron was given the land closest to Jerusalem so they would be near the temple. We also see that the Levites were not timid in asking Joshua to fulfill the promise of Moses, even as Caleb did in chapter 14.

What is significant about these cities? We read in Josh. 13:33: "But to the tribe of Levi, Moses did not give an inheritance; the LORD, the God of Israel, is their inheritance, as He had promised to them."

How would you feel if you were part of this tribe, knowing that every other tribe had an inheritance except yours? You might think that somehow you had missed out, that your family was forever cursed because of something Levi had done. But, even though the tribe of Levi had no physical inheritance they had an inheritance in the Lord; and in the end, that inheritance was more precious than that of all the other tribes. What Levi received came from God, the owner of the land. God gave to Levi the tithe that he received from all the other tribes. So what at first appeared to be a curse actually became a blessing. The Levites were given a special role, the task of the priestly duties. Their job was to teach the law that sanctified, blessed and secured God's people in the land. Moses, Eleazar, Phineas, Ezra, and John the Baptist were all Levites. Thus, Levi's inheritance was in the Lord.

What a great encouragement this is for us! Daily we suffer the consequences of our sin. At times we feel we have missed out on an inheritance, a blessing. We feel that we will have to pay for our sins or the sins of our fathers and mothers forever. But in the tribe of Levi we see that God can turn our curses into blessings. We can still be used by him. We don't require a physical blessing. We don't have to live feeling that we missed out, that we are forever second-rate, living without any hope or direction, always downcast and regretful, because our inheritance is always in the Lord.

David, the great king of Israel who had wealth and land and cities, learned that there was nothing more beautiful to him than this inheritance, as Psalm 16 declares:

The LORD is the portion of my inheritance and my cup;
Thou dost support my lot.
The lines have fallen to me in pleasant places;
Indeed, my heritage is beautiful to me (Ps. 16:5-6).

On a personal note, I can relate to the tribe of Levi. Looking back over the years, I see a greatly wasted youth and squandered resources. I have often said that I probably sinned more in one weekend than most of you have done in your lifetime. And yet God has given me the privilege to study and teach his Word. What a tremendous blessing that is to me! And what a responsibility too! God has given me something that is so much better than anything I could have hoped for.

Of course, as Christians, all of us are Levites, really. We have our inheritance in the Lord. We are part of the holy priesthood. We have been given the Word to know and impart to others. So, if you think that you have forever missed out, consider the tribe of Levi. Don't allow self-pity to drown out the voice of God. Come to him and ask for your inheritance, even as Levi. The Lord wants you to have your inheritance in his city. Washington Irving said, "It lightens the stroke to draw near to him who handles the rod." God will use you. He will even use your sin. For him, nothing is wasted. So draw near and experience the beauty of your heritage.

I delight in the images which these cities portray for us as Christians. They are snapshots of grace, grace in city gates. My prayer is that they will be engraved into the very fabric of our lives.

Since therefore, brethren, we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful (Heb. 10:19-23).

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