

## **FLEEING FOR REFUGE.**

– *JOSHUA 20:1-9. – NOVEMBER 2. –*

**"God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble."**

– **Psa. 46:1**

VERY WISE INDEED was the divine arrangement of cities of refuge for the Israelites. Six of these were designated, so scattered throughout the length and breadth of Palestine that they were convenient for the whole people. They were of divine appointment and had already been referred to through Moses (Num. 35:9-34; Deut. 4:41-43; 19:1-9), and by him their purpose had been fully set forth. Now that Israel had entered the land of promise and taken possession of it, the time had come for the putting of this measure into effect. The six cities chosen as refuges were all of them cities of the Levites which would all the more insure their being free from all tribal bias or prejudice. The tribe of Levi stood separate and distinct from all the other tribes and was specially interested in all; as the religious representatives of the nation it was fitting, therefore, that these refuges from justice should be of the Levites wards – under their protection.

From earliest times and in almost all countries the taking of life has been a capital offense calling for the death of the slayer. In almost all countries, too, particularly in the East, it is considered the bounden duty of the person next of kin to the one slain, to avenge his death; with some it is permissible to take money as a compensation for the loss of life, but with the Jews it was not so; the law "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" held with special rigidity in respect to a life for a life. We can see the wisdom of this general law recognized by the whole human family – that human life must be considered sacred and that he who would slay another must be shown no pity. Life was originally a divine gift, although forfeited through sin, and whatever remnant of it is transmitted from parent to child is still to be esteemed

as so much of the original divine gift, and no one is at liberty to treat it lightly.

The cities of refuge were a step in advance along the line of tempering justice with mercy; they were established, not for the protection of wilful murderers [R3092 : page 312] but, for those who unintentionally, through error or accident took the life of another; any one who even thus committed man-slaughter was really worthy of death under the decree, "He that sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed," – regardless of any excuse which he might be able to offer, either of aggravation or passion or self-defense or accident. The arrangement was that anyone believing himself to be free from malice, wilful, intentional murder, might flee to one of these cities of refuge and there be protected from the full demands of the law against his life – he might thus have a measure of mercy extended to him without the condoning of his offense. It was a further regulation that the routes leading to these cities of refuge should be built and kept in thorough order, free from stumbling stones, with bridges over water-courses, etc., so as to afford the guilty ones full opportunity for a rapid flight to secure safety. Moreover at frequent intervals sign boards were erected pointing in the direction of the city of refuge and bearing the word, "Refuge." It was also a custom among Jews that two scribes should accompany the refugee with the special object of persuading the avenger should he overtake the culprit, to permit him to reach the city of refuge and there have a proper trial of his cause to hear what could be said on his behalf. This was a recognition of the justice of vengeance, but it was also an inculcation of mercy. Apparently the whole people felt a sympathy for every person fleeing from an avenger to a city of refuge, as each one realized his own liability at some time to commit a similar offense and thus likewise need to seek refuge and mercy.

Arrived at the city of refuge, the culprit was not free, but was obliged to stand for trial before the elders of the city representing the congregation of Israel. He was received into the city and protected

until such time as the trial could take place. His cause was carefully investigated; – Prof. Beecher remarks respecting these trials: "Much stress is laid upon the previous conduct of the slayer, and the relations between him and his victim, whether he lay in wait for the slain man (Deut. 19:11), whether he 'hunted' for him or not (Ex. 21:13; Num. 35:20,22), whether he smote him 'in secret.' (Deut. 27:24). Was it presumptuous, – that is to say, malicious? (Ex. 21:14). Was it with guile? (Ex. 21:14). Especially, was there enmity previously between the two men? (Num. 35:21,22). Was there hatred of the slain on the part of the slayer? (Num. 35:21,23; Deut. 19:4,6,11; Josh. 20:5)."

The fact that so many particulars were enumerated shows that the trial contemplated was to be a careful one; it was not therefore the intention of these cities of refuge to defeat the ends of justice, but that while serving the ends of justice, mercy might be extended to those who were proper subjects for it. If the man were found guilty of deliberate murder, intentional, premeditated, the city of refuge did not save him from the death penalty; and if he were acquitted of any malice, he, nevertheless, was obliged to remain in the city of refuge or within its suburbs of 1,000 cubits beyond the walls (Num. 35:26,28), for the remainder of his life, or until the death of the high priest. This was putting a heavy penalty upon carelessness, passion, etc., a penalty of separation from family, a restriction of liberty which, undoubtedly, would be beneficial, not only to the individual under restriction but, in its influence beneficial upon the whole people. The careless man is culpable, and when his carelessness results in serious injury to another it is but right that the matter should result in his own inconvenience – that it should cost him something.

The high priest was in some respects the most prominent individual in the nation, and his death, therefore, would be such a notable event as to be known throughout all the tribes, and on that occasion all refugees in all cities of refuge would be at liberty to return to their homes free from danger from the avenger, the avenger's opportunity expiring with the death of the high priest; and were he to

avenge after that, he would be the murderer and be obliged to flee to a city of refuge. This unique arrangement, it will be observed, is the very reverse of our present-day arrangements of jails, penitentiaries, etc., and in some respects, at least, it presents advantages. The culprit [R3093 : page 312] himself was the one who sought the prison and who desired to stay therein for his own protection during the appointed time. This certainly avoided the necessity of building massive, walled, iron-barred jails from which prisoners continually seek to escape. And instead of inciting the people to the pursuit of the offender under the presumption of his guilt even before his trial, it rather conduced to a reverse condition of sentiment – the supposition of the culprit's innocence and the desire and sympathy on the part of the people to assist him to safety and protection and mercy.

Our Golden Text draws to our attention an antitypical significance of these cities of refuge: "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in time of trouble." From the time we become acquainted with the real facts of our case, we realize that a death sentence has been issued which involves each one of us. We realize, too, that justice has a full right to pursue us unto death because we have "all sinned and come short of the glory of God"; and because the "wages of sin is death." The Apostle Paul points out this matter distinctly (Rom. 5:12), saying "By one man[*'s* disobedience] sin entered into the world and death by sin; and so [thus] death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned." From the moment, therefore, that we recognize that we are sinners – that we could not stand approved in the divine presence, – from that moment we realize that the avenger, Justice, is upon our trail, and that it is only a question of time when we will be overtaken and destroyed unless we reach some place of refuge. As we flee we see finger-posts which God has set for our instruction pointing us to Christ as the only place of refuge, and to him we have to flee.

We are abiding now within the hallowed precincts of this salvation, deliverance, refuge, which God himself has provided for us;

even as it is written, "It is God that justifieth; who is he that condemneth?" And yet it is with us even as it is shown in the type, a place of refuge not from wilful and intentional violation of the divine Law, but a refuge to cover our weaknesses [R3093 : page 313] and ignorance – the results of the fall. As a thorough investigation was made in the type, so we may be sure that in our cases a thorough investigation of motives, intention, etc., will be instituted.

Fortunately for us, this refuge in Christ is specially intended for those who are "new creatures in Christ Jesus," whose sinful course prior to coming to a knowledge of the Lord is accounted, not as intentional or wilful, but, as of ignorance. Our responsibilities for wilful sin may, therefore, be said to begin with and keep pace with our knowledge of the divine Law. Although acquitted as respects wilful sin whose penalty would be the Second Death, it is necessary that we continue to "abide in him" – that we do not put off the robe of Christ's righteousness. If we leave the city of refuge, – if we abandon our trust in the precious blood which cleanseth us from all sin, we become liable again to the demands of Justice and that without mercy. Divine justice is represented in the avenger, as divine mercy is represented in the city of refuge, and he who would leave the city of refuge necessarily falls into the hands of Justice; as again the Apostle explains, "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" – to depart from Christ, to abandon the mercy and forgiveness which the Father has extended toward us, as culprits, – through the Beloved One.

How long must we abide thus in the mercy of Christ and have no standing or liberty outside of his robe of righteousness, no safety outside his provision of refuge? We answer that we must thus abide "until the death of the high priest." This is already in a large measure accomplished – the Head of the antitypical high priest, our Lord and Master, already has finished the work that the Father gave him to do, and the members of the body of the high priest, his Church in the flesh, are filling up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ, and soon the entire high priest, its every member, will have died. Then the new

dispensation will be ushered in and no longer will we be obliged to own our own imperfection and the need of a covering before justice; from thenceforth having been made perfect by a share in the First Resurrection, having been made like our Lord and Master, we shall be presented before the Father blameless, unprovable, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, without any vengeance against us on the part of divine justice.

The entire arrangement is of God – Justice is the avenger of sin, and Christ is the refuge and deliverance; therefore, while acknowledging the Lord Jesus and appreciating very highly his work for us, the redemption accomplished through his sacrifice and all the blessings which come from the Father through him, and thus honoring the Son as we honor the Father also, it is nevertheless appropriate that we should remember that all these blessings are of the Father through the Son. "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in time of trouble."

