

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?

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?

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.

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?

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?

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:

- ① 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.
- ② 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?
- ③ 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?
- ④ 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.

The Offering

by MOUSSAH NUHU-DAMARU

It was a tough time in Nigeria. I worked for the government, and my wife was a teacher, but we hadn't been paid in weeks. And my wife was expecting. We weren't sure how we would manage.

I still hadn't been paid when my wife went into labor. I had no money to pay the hospital, the doctors in the government hospitals were on strike, and the mission hospital was too far away. Our only option was an expensive private hospital.

We hired a taxi to take us to the private hospital, but on the way my wife started delivering the baby. The driver found a small clinic where she was able to deliver the baby. We rejoiced in our newborn son and thanked God for saving us a lot of money!

Two days later teachers were told to report in person to be paid their back wages. I couldn't go for my wife; she had to go herself and take our new son with her. And after waiting all day to be paid, she was told to return the next day!

On Sabbath morning I prepared for church. I wanted to give a thank offering for our new son, but I still hadn't been paid, and I had only eight naira (about six cents)! As an elder I felt a responsibility to be a good example, and that included faithfulness in tithes and offerings. How could I give just eight naira to God? Finally I gave my mother five naira and my three older children one naira each. I went to church with nothing.

During Sabbath School my son said that a man wanted to see me. I went outside to see what he wanted. I recognized the man and greeted him. He wasn't a church member and I wondered how he knew where to find me. "Can we go somewhere and talk?" he asked.

I walked him to my house, which was nearby, and we sat down. Then he pulled out a roll of bills and peeled off 8,000 naira (\$60)! Imagine my surprise! I had forgotten that this man had owed me money. I thanked the man and hurried back to church.

I returned tithe on the money the man had given me and took a fitting offering for the thank offering. Later I told my wife what had happened.

The next day she was finally able to get her long-overdue pay. God is faithful!

Things became easier for us after that, but I'll never forget how God provided an offering just at the right time. Giving an offering for mission is always a blessing.

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Next quarter's Bible study guide will explore how the Holy Spirit works in the lives of those who have surrendered their hearts to Christ. The guide will look at the fruit the Holy Spirit creates in us and how that defines the type of person we are to become in Jesus. "The Fruit of the Spirit," by Richard O'Ffill, will help you realize how you can allow the Holy Spirit to make you a new creation in Christ. The key to this process is a willingness to die to self and to live for God and others. This fruit in our lives is the result of salvation, not the means. Jesus is always the means, which we claim by faith.

Lesson 1—"By Their Fruit . . ."

The Week at a Glance:

SUNDAY: "Every Tree Is Known by Its Own Fruit" (*Luke 6:44*)

MONDAY: "Without Me You Can Do Nothing" (*John 15:1-5*)

TUESDAY: "By This My Father Is Glorified" (*John 15:8*)

WEDNESDAY: "That It May Bear More Fruit" (*John 15:2*)

THURSDAY: "And If It Bears Fruit, Well. But If Not . . ." (*Luke 13:9*)

Memory Text—*Matthew 7:20*

Sabbath Gem: If we abide in the Lord and allow Him to abide in us through His Spirit, we will be changed, even radically.

Lesson 2—The Fruit of the Spirit Is Love

The Week at a Glance:

SUNDAY: Love Is Multi-Dimensional (*Deut. 6:5, Matt. 22:39*)

MONDAY: What Love Does (*1 Cor. 13:4-7*)

TUESDAY: What Love Doesn't Do (*1 Cor. 13:4-7*)

WEDNESDAY: The Test of Love (*Matt. 5:43-48*)

THURSDAY: Love in Action (*Luke 10:25-37*)

Memory Text—*1 Corinthians 13:13*

Sabbath Gem: True Godlike love is something altogether different from what we as humans often label or consider as love. Yet, God's love impacts our entire existence, our way of life, and how we relate to others. Love is so central to God's character that it should be central to ours, as well.

Lessons for the Visually Impaired The regular *Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide* is available free each month in braille and on audiocassette to sight-impaired and physically handicapped persons who cannot read normal ink print. This includes individuals who, because of arthritis, multiple sclerosis, paralysis, accident, old age, and so forth, cannot hold or focus on normal ink-print publications. Contact Christian Record Services, Box 6097, Lincoln, NE 68506-0097.