

Abiding Fruit

Informing the Mind & Inflaming the Heart

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Manslayers, Avengers, & Cities of Refuge Numbers 35

This chapter from Numbers is one of those chapters filled with relevant application to our own situation today. Who are the manslayers today? Who are they killers of? Who are the avengers? Is it an individual or a law court or God? Is there any refuge available to these manslayers, and if so, what kind of refuge is it? There are both, physical and spiritual benefits or applications from this chapter. This chapter is primarily focused on the six cities of refuge. These cities are provided by God as a place of refuge – a place where a manslayer could go, and if he was innocent, be safe (vs. 25). The avenger could pursue his course of action freely. If the manslayer was indeed guilty and found to be so, he would be handed over to the avenger. If the manslayer was innocent, but the avenger required revenge, the manslayer was free as long as he remained in his city of refuge until the death of the then incumbent high priest. Should he leave prior to the death of the high priest, then the avenger could slay the manslayer.

The manslayer is regarded as innocent if he killed someone without intent (vs. 15), but he still must flee to the city of refuge because the manslayer could seek to avenge himself. If the manslayer was guilty of murder, then the city of refuge would hold no refuge for him. He would stand trial and once convicted, the avenger could slay him (vs. 19). His conviction could only be verified by a plurality of witnesses. One witness was insufficient to find or pronounce someone guilty (vs. 30). The guilty party had no recourse to a ransom – it was life for life. We find this principle first declared in the Bible in Genesis 9:6 - "*Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image.*" The law known as *lex talionis* is found in Genesis 9:5 – "*and for your lifeblood I will require a reckoning: from every beast I will require it and from man. From his fellow man I will require a reckoning for the life of man.*"

The *lex talionis* is the law of direct and equal retribution. Jesus refers to this very law in Matthew 5:38 – "*You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'*" Our Lord was quoting from Exodus 21:24 (see also Lev. 24:20 and Deut. 19:21). Retribution demands equal payment or suffering. It was this law that was to govern Israel in the land, and it was this law that God gave to Noah (Gen. 9:5, 6) that would enable man after the flood to govern himself. What is significant in the case laws of the Pentateuch as expressed in Exodus 21 - 23 is that the courts when required and under necessity (as in the case of murder, rape, assault, etc), were to make a careful decision, but judgment was to be enacted swiftly. Murder was not tolerated and the guilty suffered the full extent of the law as quickly as possible. Saddam Hussein eventually received his due reward by decision of the court in Iraq. We are used to lengthy and controversial court cases (e.g. O J Simpson) which at times, leaves us baffled and confused. There were no technicalities in the Old Testament system.

This is not to say that there could not be false witnesses (as in the case of our Lord, but their witness did not agree together – see Matt. 26:59 – 61; Mark 14:55 - 59). Generally this law of *lex talionis* was observed and acted upon. If citizens of a country know that the law is swift and exact, there must be a lessening of evil. Where the criminal knows that the law is weak and open to every kind of technical interpretation and time is available to him, it is then that crime may be committed with impunity. God gave to Israel a beautiful set of laws by which they could govern themselves, protect themselves and ensure honest dealings with each other. Lurking in the background, or course, is the problem of sin. It

was the Law of God that would deal with sin, and if Israel were careful to practice the commandments of God, then they could be assured that blessing would follow. Disobedience on the other hand, would bring the judgment of God (See Deut. 27, 28). This is why it is so important and critical to be cognizant of the covenant relationship that the people of God enjoy. There are covenant blessings and judgments.

The six cities of refuge were strategically located in Israel. They existed on both sides of the Jordan River (three in Canaan and three beyond the Jordan – see vs. 14). These six cities were part of the inheritance allotted to the Levites (vv. 2, 6 – 8). The Levites were to receive a total of forty-eight cities for them to dwell in. Each city provided pastureland for the Levites so that they could care for their livestock. The six cities of refuge were part of the forty-eight cities. The cities of refuge could provide refuge for Israelite, stranger and sojourner alike. Again, the purpose for the cities was to provide a place of safety from the avenger, only in the cases where murder without intent occurred. Murder with intent received immediate punishment, either via the avenger or the court or assembly (who would hand over the manslayer to the avenger for justice).

Numbers 35 lists a number of reasons in verses 16 – 21 under which murder might occur. All of these reveal that the murder was committed with intent or enmity. As in every case of law, it is intent that must be determined. The cities of refuge provided that place of refuge until the intent issue could be resolved. This allowed the system time to deal with both avenger and manslayer. It also provided the important opportunity for witnesses to step forward and be examined. The cities of refuge protected this process.

Now the question that rises logically from all of this is, why must the manslayer stay in the city of refuge if it is determined that he killed someone without murderous intent? The answer to this is found in God's view of shedding blood. The manslayer could not pay off the debt by ransom or any other means. He must remain within the city of refuge if judged innocent (without intent or enmity), until the death of the high priest alive at that time. What is God's view of the blood shed in a murder? God says that any blood shed pollutes the land, and that there is no atonement that can be made for that shed blood (i.e. the murdered person – see vs. 33), except in life for life. Another reason is because God said that He Himself dwelt among the people in the land (vs. 34), and therefore blood shed would defile the land, unless paid for, through the penalty imposed by the city of refuge. So, bloodshed in murder pollutes the land, and the only cleansing measure is the blood of the murdered himself – thus the necessity or permission granted to the avenger. God did not want Israel to dwell in a polluted land, and neither did God want to dwell in such a land. This is the same principle that God mentions to Cain who killed Abel in Genesis 4. Abel's blood cried to God from the ground (Gen. 4:10), as it does today (abortion & murder). The curse upon Cain was related to his future difficulties with working the land (Gen. 4:11, 12).

The word that describes the avenger is the word used for a kinsman-redeemer. He is acting on behalf of his family or relations. Could it not be said of our Lord Jesus that He has acted on our behalf as the avenger. He is also our city of refuge. He has defeated the manslayer (sin, death, the devil). He has shed blood (his own) to redeem us. He is our Elder brother, and He is not ashamed to call us brothers (Heb. 2:11). He has tasted death for us all, we who were in fear of death (manslayer) and subject to lifelong slavery. As our High Priest, He has died for our sins. He is our atonement. He has secured our salvation and He now keeps us safe. The manslayer cannot slay us for we are now in Christ. Have you fled for refuge to Him? Is the manslayer hot on your trail? Flee to Christ. Do not delay. Find security, eternal rest and safety in our Lord Jesus Christ. Give thanks for your deliverance in the Lord Jesus. He has satisfied God's Law – ransom is made. We are now free.