

CHAPTER 20

This short chapter is concerning the cities of refuge, which we often read of in the writings of Moses, but this is the last time that we find mention of them, for now that matter was thoroughly settled. Here is,

- I. The law God gave concerning them (v. 1-6).
- II. The people's designation of the particular cities for that use (v. 7-9). And this remedial law was a figure of good things to come.

<630> JOSHUA 20:1-6

THE CITIES OF REFUGE

Many things were by the law of Moses ordered to be done when they came to Canaan and this among the rest, the appointing of sanctuaries for the protecting of those that were guilty of casual murder, which was a privilege to all Israel, since no man could be sure but some time or other it might be his own case; and it was for the interest of the land that the blood of an innocent person, whose hand only was guilty but not his heart, should not be shed, no, not by the avenger of blood: of this law, which was so much for their advantage, God here reminds them, that they might remind themselves of the other laws he had given them, which concerned his honour.

1. Orders are given for the appointing of these cities (v. 2), and very seasonably at this time when the land was newly surveyed, and so they were the better able to divide the coasts of it into three parts, as God had directed them, in order to the more convenient situation of these cities of refuge, <618> Deuteronomy 19:3. Yet it is probable that it was not done till after the Levites had their portion assigned them in the next chapter, because the cities of refuge were all to be Levites' cities. As soon as ever God had given them cities of rest, he bade them appoint cities of refuge, to which none of them knew but they might be glad to escape. Thus God provided, not only for their ease at all times, but for their safety in times of

danger, and such times we must expect and prepare for in this world. And it intimates what God's spiritual Israel have and shall have, in Christ and heaven, not only rest to repose themselves in, but refuge to secure themselves in. And we cannot think these cities of refuge would have been so often and so much spoken of in the law of Moses, and have had so much care taken about them (when the intention of them might have been effectually answered, as it is in our law, by authorizing the courts of judgment to protect and acquit the manslayer in all those cases wherein he was to have privilege of sanctuary), if they were not designed to typify the relief which the gospel provides for poor penitent sinners, and their protection from the curse of the law and the wrath of God, in our Lord Jesus, to whom believers flee for refuge (~~(3068)~~ Hebrews 6:18), and in whom they are found (~~(3109)~~ Philippians 3:9) as in a sanctuary, where they are privileged from arrests, and *there is now no condemnation to them,* ~~(3101)~~ Romans 8:1.

2. Instructions are given for the using of these cities. The laws in this matter we had before, ~~(4510)~~ Numbers 35:10, etc., where they were opened at large.

(1.) It is supposed that a man might possibly kill a person, it might be his own child or dearest friend, unawares and unwittingly (v. 3), not only whom he hated not, but whom he truly loved beforetime (v. 5); for *the way of man is not in himself*. What reason have we to thank God who has kept us both from slaying and from being slain by accident! In this case, it is supposed that the relations of the person slain would demand the life of the slayer, as a satisfaction to that ancient law that *whoso sheds man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed*.

(2.) It is provided that if upon trial it appeared that the murder was done purely by accident, and not by design, either upon an old grudge or a sudden passion, then the slayer should be sheltered from the avenger of blood in any one of these cities, v. 4-6. By this law he was entitled to a dwelling in that city, was taken into the care of the government of it, but was confined to it, as prisoner at large; only, if he survived the high priest, then, and not till then, he might return to his own city. And the Jews say, "If he died before the high priest in the city of his refuge and exile, and was buried there, yet, at the death of the high priest, his bones should be removed with respect to the place of his fathers' sepulchres."

<B11> JOSHUA 20:7-9

THE CITIES OF REFUGE

We have here the nomination of the cities of refuge in the land of Canaan, which was made by the advice and authority of Joshua and the princes (v. 7); and upon occasion of the mention of this is repeated the nomination of the other three in the lot of the other two tribes and a half, which was made by Moses (<B14> Deuteronomy 4:43), but (as bishop Patrick thinks) they had not the privilege till now.

1. They are said to *sanctify* these cities, that is the original word for *appointed*, v. 7. Not that any ceremony was used to signify the consecration of them, only they did by a public act of court solemnly declare them cities of refuge, and as such sacred to the honour of God, as the protector of exposed innocency. If they were sanctuaries, it was proper to say they were *sanctified*. Christ, our refuge, was sanctified by his Father; nay, for our sakes he sanctified himself, <B17> John 17:19.

2. These cities (as those also on the other side Jordan) stood in the three several parts of the country, so conveniently that a man might (they say) in half a day reach some one of them from any corner of the country. Kedesh was in Naphtali, the most northern tribe, Hebron in Judah, the most southern, and Shechem in Ephraim, which lay in the middle, about equally distant from the other two. God is a refuge at hand.

3. They were all Levites' cities, which put an honour upon God's tribe, making them judges in those cases wherein divine Providence was so nearly concerned, and protectors to oppressed innocency. It was also a kindness to the poor refugee, that when he might not go up to the house of the Lord, nor tread his courts, yet he had the servants of God's house with him, to instruct him, and pray for him, and help to make up the want of public ordinances. If he must be confined, it shall be to a Levite-city, where he may, if he will, improve his time.

4. These cities were upon hills to be seen afar off, for a city on a hill cannot be hid; and this would both direct and encourage the poor distressed man that was making that way; and, though therefore his way at last was up-hill, yet this would comfort him, that he would be in his place of safety

quickly, and if he could but get into the suburbs of the city he was well enough off.

5. Some observe a significancy in the names of these cities with application to Christ our refuge. I delight not in quibbling upon names, yet am willing to take notice of these. *Kedesh* signifies *holy*, and our refuge is the holy Jesus. *Shechem*, *a shoulder*, and the government is upon his shoulder. *Hebron*, *fellowship*, and believers are called into the fellowship of Christ Jesus our Lord. *Bezer*, *a fortification*, for he is a strong-hold to all those that trust in him. *Ramoth*, *high or exalted*, for him hath God exalted with his own right hand. *Golan*, *joy or exultation*, for in him all the saints are justified, and shall glory. *Lastly*, Besides all these, the horns of the altar, wherever it was, were a refuge to those who took hold of them, if the crime were such as that sanctuary allowed. This is implied in that law (~~<0214>~~Exodus 21:14), that a wilful murderer shall be taken from God's altar to be put to death. And we find the altar used for this purpose. ~~<105>~~1 Kings 1:50; 2:28. Christ is our altar, who not only *sanctifies the gift*, but protects the giver.