

Cities of Refuge

Joshua 20:1-9

Preached by Phillip Kayser at DCC on Sunday, August 4th 2024

I. Introduction

Well, hopefully this morning you will see that the cities of refuge are not irrelevant to us. I believe they give us practical lessons on civics as well as (what most people see) symbolic lessons on our relationship with Jesus. But we will start with civics. These are the lessons that most people ignore.

II. Application to civics

A. This is not simply an adaptation of pagan civics (vv. 1-2)

And the first thing I want you to see is that this is not simply a leftover vestige of some antiquated patriarchal form of justice - like some people make it out to be. Verses 1-2 are quite clear:

Josh. 20:1 The LORD also spoke to Joshua, saying, 2 “Speak to the children of Israel, saying: ‘Appoint for yourselves cities of refuge, of which I spoke to you through Moses...

God *Himself* is giving these instructions and He is reminding them of His law laid down by Moses. So the bottom line is that this passage reflects both the grace and the justice of God. So even if there is no one-to-one parallel for today, we still need to mine the core principles of justice and grace. And that’s what I hope to do today.

B. God distinguished between premeditated murder and manslaughter (v. 3)

And right off the bat this passage helps us to distinguish between murder and manslaughter. And it is a very helpful distinction. Beginning with the country of Armenia, Christian nations began to adopt this distinction into their law code. Not all nations have made this distinction, but I think it is an important one.

Look at verse 3. Verse 3 begins, “that the slayer who kills a person accidentally or unintentionally may flee there...” This shows that criminal law needs to look at intent. A person had been killed, but in this case it was because of an accident. It was not intentional. If that is true of an issue related to death, how much more so of other issues. I think all four perspectives of ethics (what I call quadperspectivalism) need to be taken into account in the realm of civil law.

But his need to flee to the city shows that there was a penalty. It's not as if he got off Scott free just because it was an accident. There are consequences to carelessness.

In the Bible, everything God considered to be a crime was given a specific sentence, and if you can't find a penalty for it in the Bible, then it is not a crime. And every penalty God gave fit the nature of the crime so as to produce justice. Exodus 21 says, "...you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe" (vv. 23-25). That verse would indicate that an abortionist who cuts a baby apart limb by limb should not receive a painless death. There needs to be a just retribution. Shooting him is too good for a baby butcher. Like-receives-like. And God's penalties were not just intended to punish; they were intended to inspire fear. If people were punished in the Biblical way, abortion would become extremely rare, and it would become rare pretty quickly.

In any case, many verses require that when a human life was taken, the murderer was to be executed. But these verses outline both a rescue and a punishment of the man guilty of manslaughter. Even accidental manslaughter does not get off Scott-free. So this indicates that *any* taking of life is considered serious by God, but He gives far less punishment for accidental manslaughter than he does for murder.

C. God established an "avenger of blood" for murder (vv. 3-5)

Let's start with murder. The purpose for the avenger of blood was to execute God's vengeance on a murderer. Group executions were done by stoning, but an avenger of blood could execute with sword or spear or some other weapon. It shows some flexibility within Biblical penology. Not all theologians agree with that, but I believe there is some flexibility. But one way or the other, God wanted all blood-guilt removed from the land. In Numbers 35 God said this:

Num. 35:16 "But if he strikes him with an iron implement, so that he dies, he is a murderer; the murderer shall surely be put to death. 17 And if he strikes him with a stone in the hand, by which one could die, and he does die, he is a murderer; the murderer shall surely be put to death. 18 Or if he strikes him with a wooden hand weapon, by which one could die, and he does die, he is a murderer; the murderer shall surely be put to death. 19 The avenger of blood himself shall put the murderer to death; when he meets him, he shall put him to death. 20 If he pushes him out of hatred or, while lying in wait, hurls something at him so that he dies, 21 or in enmity he strikes him with his hand so that he dies, the one who struck him shall surely be put to death. He is a murderer. The avenger of blood shall put the murderer to death when he meets him.

Deuteronomy 19, Numbers 35, and Joshua 20 all describe this avenger of blood with the Hebrew word *go-el* (גֹּאֵל), which is sometimes translated as Kinsman Redeemer. Ah! So just by using that word we already know that there must be at least *some* ceremonial law here that is no longer binding. Not everything found in this passage can be applied to the state today. And the reason is obvious - we no longer have a Kinsman Redeemer who can typologically point forward to Jesus. In a moment we will look at the typology of the

passage. But I want to point out that even though there is not a one-to-one correspondence to today, *since this passage does indeed describe God's justice*, we can still apply the general *principles* of this justice to our modern society. So don't ignore the passage because there is some ceremonial law involved. Obviously we won't have God-appointed cities of refuge, but we can have equivalents that are minus the ceremonial law. We won't have *go-els* today, but we can have equivalents minus the ceremonial law. We don't have a high priest, so we can't 100% apply the provision that the man can leave the city when the high priest dies, but justice would still require that the person's freedom of movement be somewhat restricted for a long period of time.

And I should point out that this city was not a prison. Some people use this passage to justify prisons. I'm sorry, but this city was anything but a prison. Each of the cities of refuge were fairly large and so the person guilty of manslaughter was free to roam within the city and work within the city. But the city still did restrict his movements - at least if he didn't want to risk being killed by the *go-el*. If he was willing to take the risk, then yeah, he was free to leave.

But we need to understand who the *go-el* was in order to make a general equity application. The *go-el* was a recognized part of the local militia from the same community that the man lived in. He didn't have to be full-time in that role as an avenger of blood, though Scripture shows some who were - especially during times of trouble. If a murder happened, God wanted there to be a personal presence of this clansman to bring closure to the murder. Some people simply think that it is enough to have a relative throw the switch on an electric chair. While that can bring closure to the murder, there is more to it than that. The kinsman redeemer or avenger of blood was a mighty man like Boaz or like Joab who helped to establish order in the land. It wasn't just any relative. Thus, many think that he was the head of the local militia, while others think that he was more equivalent to a permanent sheriff. I happen to hold to that second viewpoint. For example, Boaz was a kinsman's-redeemer/avenger-of-blood.

And there was a lot of latitude given to the *go-el* just as there is a fair bit of latitude given to a modern sheriff. When a murderer resists arrest, the sheriff can respond with force, even up to killing the perp if it looks like others may be endangered without doing so. Numbers 35 doesn't require the *go-el* to wait till a court is in session if the dangerous man is on the loose. He can kill him on sight.

So could this *go-el* execute people at will? No. He would either have to have witnessed the killing or to have talked to enough witnesses to be able to clearly identify this dangerous man on the run. If you want an analogy, just think of the secret service agent taking out the young man who attempted to assassinate former president Trump. The secret service didn't have to wait till a court determined his guilt. He was in the process of doing guilty things worthy of retaliation. He was taken out before he could get any more rounds off because he was an immediate danger. And it is precisely because of such latitude that a man guilty of manslaughter but not guilty of murder might need to high-tail it to a city of refuge where a court trial could be held. If he wasn't guilty of either, then he would return home once the avenger of blood heard the verdict. And I will give more details as we move along.

D. If the man guilty of manslaughter has turned himself in, then there must first be a court case (v. 4); justice was not bypassed (Numb. 35:16-23; 30-32)

But in the case given in verse 4, the man is guilty of manslaughter but not guilty of first-degree murder. So the man turned himself in to an objective court to hear him out. He was not trying to bypass justice. It says,

And when he flees to one of those cities, and stands at the entrance of the gate of the city, and declares his case in the hearing of the elders of that city, they shall take him into the city as one of them, and give him a place, that he may dwell among them.

It's not a haven apart from a court case. Otherwise all kinds of criminals would come to those cities claiming to be innocent. The elders of the city were responsible to hear his case and if-and-when they determined that he was innocent of murder but still guilty of manslaughter, they were to give him refuge.

E. What happens if a man is found guilty of murder by the jury of the city of refuge (Deut. 19:11-13)

I'll just briefly mention what would happen if a person who was guilty of first-degree murder ran to a city of refuge and claimed to be innocent. Deuteronomy 19:11-13 outlines exactly that scenario. It says,

Deut. 19:11 "But if anyone hates his neighbor, lies in wait for him, rises against him and strikes him mortally, so that he dies, and he flees to one of these cities, 12 then the elders of his city shall send and bring him from there, and deliver him over to the hand of the avenger of blood, that he may die. 13 Your eye shall not pity him, but you shall put away the guilt of innocent blood from Israel, that it may go well with you.

That phrase, "that it may go well with you" shows that God holds nations accountable when murderers are not executed. His restraining grace is withdrawn and the country begins to slide further and further away from Him, from His grace, and from His protection. It does not go well for that nation. This is why we cannot settle for anything less than the death penalty for abortionists and for any others who profit from the industry of abortion. If our nation wants God's favor, it must return to the death penalty. That is not an option.

F. Extradition and returning to the city (v. 6; with Numb. 35:24-28)

But verse 6 hints at a whole process of extradition from one city to the city of refuge and then returning him to the city of refuge if he was found to be innocent of murder. It says, "And he shall dwell in that city until he stands before the congregation..." What's going on there? Well, Numbers 35 fills in a few more details. And let me start by reading at verse 24:

24 then the congregation shall judge between the manslayer and the avenger of blood according to these judgments. 25 So the congregation shall deliver the

manslayer from the hand of the avenger of blood, and the congregation shall return him to the city of refuge where he had fled, and he shall remain there until the death of the high priest who was anointed with the holy oil.

This passage highlights a number of interesting issues. I'll just mention five:

1. Notice that the man went to the city of refuge of his own free will. He was not forced to go there. He was not incarcerated by a police force. He went there because there was safety provided. 2. Second, commentators point out that there were two courts who listened to the case. The city of refuge held the first court case and made a *provisional* judgment that he could stay in the city. If they found him guilty of murder, they would automatically hand him over to the avenger of blood. But theirs was only a provisional court judgment. So commentators point out that the word "congregation" refers to a different court than the court in the city of refuge. It refers to the court from his home town that he fled from. Otherwise why is that court returning him to that city of refuge? That court could issue an extradition-order so that they could give a court trial among his peers. Gary North points out that the home city would provide an escort to take him to his home town and then (if found innocent of murder) to take him back to the city of refuge. So there were actually two potential court cases. 3. Third, if what we have already said is true, Gary North points out that this means that the city of refuge almost acted like an embassy and the home court had to request that he be tried at home. They couldn't force the issue; it was a request of a different jurisdiction. 4. So when you take all of Numbers 35, Deuteronomy 19, and Joshua 20 together, you see passages rich in lessons on embassies, sanctuary cities, extradition, jurisdiction, protective custody, provisional courts, normal courts, probationary boundaries established by a court, and what could happen if a person went beyond those probationary boundaries. 5. Fifth, it is clear that the city did not force the man to stay within its confines. The Bible did not allow for any kind of police department. It expected citizens to be self-policing. And the city wasn't a prison. There were no God-authorized prisons in the Bible. All prisons should be abolished in America. They are inhumane, costly, places where criminals disciple each other into worse crime, and they are detrimental to both the prisoner and society. We need to be on a campaign against prisons and reinstitute restitution for most crimes and the death penalty for a small handful of crimes. And the reason I say that this was not a prison is that if this man wanted to risk leaving, he could. The next verses in Numbers 35 say what could happen then,

26 But if the manslayer at any time goes outside the limits of the city of refuge where he fled, 27 and the avenger of blood finds him outside the limits of his city of refuge, and the avenger of blood kills the manslayer, he shall not be guilty of blood, 28 because he should have remained in his city of refuge until the death of the high priest. But after the death of the high priest the manslayer may return to the land of his possession.

G. The inhabitants of these cities were experts in the law (Numb. 35:6; Josh 21:27)

But back to Joshua, because of how tricky it can sometimes be to determine whether someone was killed unintentionally or intentionally, each of the six cities of refuge were required to be *Levitical* cities. This is very significant. The Levites were the pastors and

theologians of the country. They were the experts in applying the Bible to life's tough issues. And Scripture is clear that each of these six cities was full of Levites who were instructed in the law of God. For example, Numbers 35:6 says,

Now among the cities which you will give to the Levites you shall appoint six cities of refuge, to which a manslayer may flee. And to these you shall add forty-two cities

Is there anything we can learn from this? I believe so. In early America, courts would sometimes call for theological experts to give advice and help the judges think through tricky issues. After all, properly applying God's law to civics is an exercise in theology. So I think there is still a role for modern Levites, a term that the Bible applies to theological teachers and pastors.

H. This passage implies the right of interposition

But there is another application that could be made. This passage implies that a city might need to rescue a person from an overzealous executive branch. In other words, it at least *introduces* the idea of interposition by cities and possibly by pastors. That's the way the early church interpreted this passage. In the first 1200 years of church history, churches many times acted in the capacity of a city of refuge when a government agent was acting tyrannically, and they hid innocent people from the state. That's legit. So again, even though there is not a one-to-one correspondence, there are principles such as interposition that can apply.

I. But life is so important to God that even manslaughter has negative implications of inconvenience and restrictions on movement (Numb. 35:25b, 28, 32)

So why did this man need to flee if he was not guilty of murder? For two possible reasons. First, the *go-el* may not have been thinking clearly or might himself have been unrighteous. Joab was a case in point where all he cared about was personal vengeance for his brother's death, not God's justice. And ironically, Joab killed Abner right in front of a city of refuge. But Abner was not guilty of either murder or manslaughter. He had only engaged in self-defense. So even though Joab was a *go-el*, there was no way that he should have retaliated by executing Abner. David and Solomon treated Joab's execution of Abner as being murder - which it was. That means that even governments can be guilty of murder. They are guilty of murder if they kill someone God has not authorized to be killed. But I use the illustration of Joab to show that there were times when a person might need to flee from an overzealous executive branch, and in that circumstance the city could provide insulation and protection.

But second, God did not intend for anyone guilty of manslaughter to get off Scott-free. This is the main point. God's law required that carelessness itself be punished. It is true that the place that he is required to flee to was designed to give some liberty, but it was also designed to *restrict* the man's movements. He could not safely leave the city until the high priest died. And yes, there is a ceremonial aspect to that which has passed away (and we

will look at that shortly), but there were still years in which he would not have had full freedom to do whatever he wanted to do. This gives justification for modern courts to have some latitude in imposing probationary travel restrictions. It wasn't a prison, but it wasn't his normal freedom either. The manslaughter may have been accidental, but such restrictions were designed to make others think twice about being careless about their actions or careless with their equipment. We cannot be careless about life. Life was considered so important by God that even manslaughter had negative consequences for a time.

J. The city of refuge held court to determine if this was murder, manslaughter, or something else (v. 4-6). If innocent, it became a place of refuge (vv. 1-6; cf. Numb. 35:9ff; Deut. 19:1ff; 4:41-43)

Nor could a *murderer* flee to such a city in the hopes of escaping punishment. Joab laid hold of the altar, which had a similar function to these cities of refuge, but Solomon executed him anyway since he had murder on his hands. It would have been a misuse of that altar to extend mercy. Anyway, verse 4 says,

And when he flees to one of those cities, and stands at the entrance of the gate of the city, and declares his case in the hearing of the elders of that city, they shall take him into the city as one of them, and give him a place, that he may dwell among them.

He would have to change his occupation, his house, and his normal routine if he was indeed guilty of manslaughter. Verse 5 shows that the city had a God-given responsibility to protect him.

Then if the avenger of blood pursues him, they shall not deliver the slayer into his hand, because he struck his neighbor unintentionally, but did not hate him beforehand.

The city was acting in a role of interposition.

Verse 6 gives two other provisions:

And he shall dwell in that city until he stands before the congregation for judgment, and until the death of the one who is high priest in those days. Then the slayer may return and come to his own city and his own house, to the city from which he fled.' "

This gives two scenarios where he stays in the city. The first is that he stays in the city until the congregation in his home town extradites him and sets a date for a trial. The other is that his home town does not seek to extradite him, the preliminary court seems to show that he was not a murderer, and he therefore stays in the city of refuge until the death of the high priest. The high priest's death completely released him from the restrictions of the city.

K. A place where foreigner and native, rich and poor were treated the same (v. 9; Numb. 35:32)

One last principle of justice is given in verse 9 and in Numbers 35:32. Those two verses gave the same justice for stranger and for native-born, and Numbers 35 adds that the same justice must be given to rich and poor. Numbers 35 prohibited a rich man from buying his way out of the restrictions placed upon him. Justice was equal for anyone in the country. If you know much about ancient history, you know that this equal protection was a departure from pagan views of justice and would have been considered to be a radical principle of justice. OK, enough on the literal applications to civics.

III. The symbolic meaning as pointing to Jesus (cf. Heb. 6:18; Deut 33:27; 2 Sam. 22:3; Ps. 9:9; 14:6; 28:8; 31:2; 46:1,7,11; 91:2,9)

Let's spend a bit of time looking at the symbolic meaning of these cities of refuge. It is pretty generally agreed that both the *go-el* and the cities of refuge were symbolic of Jesus. As *go-el* Jesus both takes vengeance on our enemies and He redeems us. But I want to especially focus today on the cities of refuge.

A. The city of refuge was a place similar to the "altar" at the temple (Ex 21:14; cf. 1 Kings 2:28-29)

Several commentators point out that the altar at the temple had a similar function to the city of refuge. But since Exodus 21:14 prohibited a murderer from gaining refuge at the altar, Solomon ordered Joab to be killed when he laid hold of the altar. But the point some commentators make is that the role of the altar hinted at the later role that cities of refuge had.¹ So there was a ceremonial aspect to them.

Thus, Hebrews 6 says that we have fled for refuge to Jesus (Heb. 6:18). And numerous Scriptures speak of God as being a city into whom we flee to find refuge. It's a beautiful picture of salvation. For example, one of the verses in your outline says,

Psa. 91:2 I will say of the LORD, "He is my refuge and my fortress; My God, in Him I will trust." ... 9 Because you have made the LORD, who is my refuge, Even the Most High, your dwelling place, 10 No evil shall befall you....

¹ For example, Silva says, "According to Exod. 21:14 a murderer could not find sanctuary at the altar. The implication is that the person who killed another accidentally could find temporary ASYLUM at the altar (in v. 13 there is a vague promise that a place would be provided for a more adequate asylum). The promise for asylum in a "place" is presented with some detail in Num. 35:9-34." Moisés Silva and Merrill Chapin Tenney, *The Zondervan Encyclopedia of the Bible, A-C* (Grand Rapids, MI: The Zondervan Corporation, 2009), 908.

It is saying that as long as we abide in Jesus, we are safe from the retribution of the law. Jesus paid the price that law could never demand twice.

B. God sovereignly established the means of mercy (vv. 1-2)

Next, verses 1-2 indicate that these cities were sovereignly established by God Himself. In the same way, Scripture says, “Salvation is of the LORD” (Jon. 2:9). It originates in God and is graciously provided by God. It’s not as if God is the meanie and Jesus is the good guy. No. God Himself provided this means of salvation. And He did so before the foundation of the world (Rev. 13:8).

Acts 4:12 is quite clear when it says, “Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.” As one old preacher worded it,

· Not Sinai — Christ! · Not Religion — Christ! · Not Feelings — Christ! · Not Baptism — Christ! · Not Good Works — Christ!

He alone is our safe refuge. But the point is that we must flee to Christ in order to be safe.

C. Each city was clearly visible on a high hill

Next, each city was situated so as to be clearly visible on a high hill. Jesus likened those who preached His Gospel to a city set on a hill (Matt. 5:14), and Paul told the Galatians, “before whose eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed among you as crucified” (Gal. 3:1), and Peter said that God had highly exalted Jesus to give repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins (Acts 5:31). God made sure that the message couldn’t be missed. As Paul worded it in Acts 26:26, “this thing was not done in a corner.”

D. God ensured easy access to the cities

Next, God ensured easy access to the cities. Deuteronomy 19 specified that the three cities on this side of the Jordan and the three cities on the other side had to have well-paved roads, with easy access, and they had to be in the midst of the land (vv. 2-3). No matter where the manslayer resided, he could reach a city within a day. Psalm 34:18 says that the Lord is near to those who have a broken heart. In terms of justification, Isaiah 51:5 says, “My righteousness is near.” It’s a very vivid image of how near Christ is to all of us, yet we still need to *come* to Him.

E. There is no mercy for presumptuous rebellion

Next, just as there was no mercy at these cities for rebels who killed with presumption, the Bible speaks of salvation only being offered to those who are humble of heart, not to those with stiff necks.

F. These cities provided refuge for Jew and Gentile alike

Verse 9 and other passages indicate that these cities provided refuge for Jew and Gentile alike, and in both testaments, Jew and Gentile could find salvation in the Messiah. No one is beyond the reach of the Gospel except for the person who rejects Christ.

G. The person was only safe if he stayed in the city

Next, the person was only safe if he *stayed* in the city. Knowing about the city did not help. Knowing others who were in the city did not help. As far as the law was concerned, punishment was death for death. But God made a special provision for unintentional death. It was to stay in the city till the death of the high priest. Solomon's execution of Shimei is a similar situation. He was worthy of death, but Solomon had mercy and told him that as long as he stayed in the city, he would be safe. When he left the city to search for two runaway slaves, he was rightly executed. Well, in the same way, we must abide in Christ. 1 John 2:28 says, "And now, little children, abide in Him, that when He appears, we may have confidence and not be ashamed before Him at His coming." He bore the death penalty for us.

H. The names of the cities typical???

I'll end the teaching on the typology by mentioning the *names* of the city. Many people believe that the names themselves were intended to foreshadow aspects of Christ's person and work. I won't spend a lot of time on them because I am not absolutely sure of their typological nature, but I do find them interesting.²

1. Kedesh = "holy."

Kedesh means "holy," and it was only as Jesus was perfectly holy that He could be our substitute. When the angel told Mary about the incarnation that was about to happen, the angel called Jesus the "Holy One" - a term repeatedly used in the Old Testament of God. The apostles called Jesus "the Holy One" in Acts 2:27; 3:14; and 13:35. It is His holiness that is the foundation of our salvation. This name may very well point to the fact that there is a refuge for those who are not holy when they come to the Holy One. Paul said that God "made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Cor. 5:21).

2. Shechem = "the shoulder." There

Shechem means "the shoulder." Isaiah 9:6 says that the government of the world rests upon Christ's shoulder. But I like the image Jesus gave of individual salvation as being the shepherd carrying the lost lamb on His shoulder and carrying him home. There is a refuge for those lost in the wilderness of sin.

² I got these ideas from Adrian Rogers in my personal notes from his sermon.

3. Hebron = “fellowship”

Hebron means “fellowship.” Those who are saved are not just saved from punishment. 1 Corinthians 1:9 says that everyone who is saved is called into the fellowship of the Son, and 1 John 1:3 says, “truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ.” This name may very well point to the fact that there is a refuge for those who are separated from God by their sin. Jesus alone can draw us into fellowship.

4. Bezer = “fortified place”

Bezer means “fortified place,” and several Old Testament prophecies of the Messiah liken Him to a fortress and strong tower. There is a refuge for those who are under the power of sin and under the power of Satan.

5. Ramoth = “exalted” or “heights”

Ramoth means “exalted,” and Philippians 2:9 says of Jesus that “God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name.” But what is especially remarkable is that Ephesians 2:6 says that when we are united to Jesus, we too are exalted. It says, “and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.”

6. Golan = “exiled”

And finally, Golan means “exiled.” Jesus was forsaken so that we would not have to be.

Now, whether or not the names themselves are typical, I am not sure, but the names do at least coincidentally highlight aspects of Christ’s person and work. In any case, let me read the last verse and reiterate what literal applications can be made from it:

IV. Summary (v. 9)

The clause, “These are the cities” reminds us that even cities can stand between lower or higher magistrates in order to protect people. This is one of many passages that informs the subject of interposition. But since these were cities composed of pastors and theologians, the early church believed that the concept of cities of refuge also justified *churches* interposing themselves in order to protect people who were being wrongly targeted. And during times of persecution, the churches provided an underground railroad for persecuted Christians.

The verse goes on to say, “These are the cities appointed...” God is the only one who can give exceptions to the death penalty for man-slaying. The modern state has the tendency toward leniency where God is severe, and the tendency toward harshness where God is moderate. What do I mean by harshness? Well, I think it is ridiculous to imprison people for a decade for theft when the Bible requires restitution to the victim. That’s being way harsher than God is. In any case, all penalties must be appointed by God.

The clause, “for all the children of Israel and for the stranger who dwelt among them...” indicates that God’s justice is color blind, economically blind, socially blind, and geographically blind. God alone can define true justice, and a judge’s loyalty to God’s law must trump every other loyalty.

The next clause, “that *whoever* killed a person accidentally” reinforces the universality of God’s principles of justice. It applies to “whoever.”

But the exception to the death penalty only applied when there was no intention of killing. The Hebrew word translated as “accidentally” is defined by the dictionary as inadvertent or unintentional mistake. This did not cover people who deliberately executed someone because they thought the person deserved it. Only a civil magistrate could execute.

By the way, other Scriptures say that killing in self-defense is an entirely different category that leaves the person completely innocent. The Bible has no problem with killing a person in self-defense if such killing is necessary.

The phrase, “might flee there” shows that the man-slayer had a responsibility to defend himself. He couldn’t expect others to look out for him if he wasn’t willing to take initiative and look out for himself. He had to at least take the first steps toward avoiding the death penalty by fleeing to the city.

The phrase, “and not die...” shows that even manslaughter deserves death in an absolute sense, but God provides for a lesser penalty because of extenuating circumstances. God’s law actually looks out for the welfare of individuals. He does not want people to needlessly die.

The phrase, “by the hand of the avenger of blood” calls for some person to be willing to bear the sword to execute vengeance. He was an officially recognized person, not anyone who wants to run down a fugitive and kill him. We don’t have an exact parallel in America, but it is pretty close to the role that a sheriff has.

And the last clause, “until he stood before the congregation,” shows that the goal of all of this was to get the person before a courtroom where his case could be objectively heard with all the checks and balances that a courtroom has. By the way, the word “congregation” also shows that there is a role that citizens play in providing justice through the court system. Representatives of the people need to ensure that justice is done since our God is a God who is very interested in justice.

And that’s all that I’ll address. Let’s pray.