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Cities of Refuge

by T. Austin-Sparks

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Reading: Deut. 19:1-13.

We want just to consider the outstanding features of this matter of the cities of refuge. I think they lie very near the surface and are not hard to discover, but they are spiritual principles and something it may be very well for us to consider.

We have read the story, we know exactly what the cities of refuge were for, what was in the background in the case of the man-slayer who unwittingly committed a grievous crime and the Lord made this provision for him.

Now we are carried right forward immediately by these types to the great Antitype in our Lord Jesus Who was the Grace of God, for these cities of refuge are a foreshadowing of that marvellous grace of God in Christ and that which is the antitype, that which was foreshadowed is far greater than the type, it always is, it goes a long way ahead of the illustration. And this can be seen immediately you come to Calvary and you hear the Lord Jesus praying to the Father from the cross, "Father, forgive them; they know not what they do." In unbelief, in blindness and in ignorance they became guilty of the blood of the Son of God, they became man-slayers, and that prayer of the Lord Jesus for them secured for them a city of refuge, a place for the man-slayer to be delivered from vengeance. The same spirit is found in the words of Stephen, "Lord, do not charge them with this sin."

How far beyond the type is the antitype; it is almost difficult to follow it right on and to harmonise two things: the fact that there was hatred and malice, vindictiveness, bitterness and yet ignorance. The grace of God went so far as to see even in that blind hate and ignorance, to make provision for what they did in unbelief and ignorance. That provision was made for them, but only a few availed

themselves of it. Amongst those few was one Saul of Tarsus who spoke later on of having fled to take refuge with One that was mighty. There was a bitter one there. There was one full of wrath and hatred and spite there, but we know how he afterwards confessed that he did it in ignorance, but verily believed that it was the right thing to do, that he ought to do many things contrary to the Name of the Lord Jesus. And the Lord took account of the darkness, the blindness, the ignorance that expressed itself even in that bitter hatred for Him, and the Lord's prayer on the cross was answered, and Saul of Tarsus found a City of Refuge though he was a man-slayer: a City of Refuge in the Lord Jesus.

This grace of God is a thing upon which you and I do well to meditate. There are depths of our natures which we have never yet fathomed or understood, and how the Lord has gone down to the very depths to our unconscious need. There are depths of unconscious need in the matter of the sin of our nature, deep depths, but blessed be God, He has made provision in His Son for everything to the very bottom-most depths of our sinful nature. Beyond the reach and range of our consciousness the Lord has provided refuge, a place of covering, a means of grace.

I do not know why the Lord should press upon one to say that at the outset of this message, but whether it has a specific application and object in His mind for some, surely it ought to draw every one of us afresh into the praising and magnifying of the grace of God. It is just sometimes difficult to get in between the wrong we do to the Lord (to one another, which is to the Lord) and the recognition and knowledge of how wrong that is. I mean that on the one hand there may be the wrong and on the other hand there may not be a very real consciousness of the wrong. We may wake up to it sometime or other and then see by reason of recognising the depth of the wrong, how great the grace of God was that we were not judged according to what God saw. The grace of God is a bigger thing than we realise, a deeper thing than we realise; our measuring of sin and wrong is always less than God's, but God goes to the depths of His own judgment of sin, not of man.

You and I are going one day to see how sinful sin was, how awful evil is in the very principle and very nature, and then we are going to see how great the grace of God was. And if we understand anything at all about that which prompts the song of the redeemed, it is that they have now come to see how great that redemption was, how deep the need of redemption was, and how wonderful the grace of God was. We will sing then of our Redeemer and His wondrous love to us as we cannot sing now because we have not got to the place where we are able to recognise the sinfulness of sin as God sees it, but when by His side we see it as He sees it, then we will not know how to give expression to our appreciation of the grace of God. That means that the course of the believer's life should be one of increasing appreciation of the grace of God, and that is the test. If there is any kind of progress that we think we are making spiritually, but it falls short of bringing us under a stronger and ever stronger realisation of the sinfulness of sin, and therefore of the greatness of the grace of God, that is not true spiritual progress. If spiritual progress for us does not mean that sin becomes more heinous, more awful, then that is a false progress. The true advance into the light is to recognise how black blackness is and that recognition ought to be deepening in our hearts. The grace of God - that means that the cities of refuge for us should become very dear or to put it into New Testament terms, the Lord Jesus in His universal work for us should be more and more wonderful and precious in the refuge which He has provided, the grace of God as set forth in these cities of refuge.

There seems to me to be another factor that comes in, besides the Lord Jesus being Himself the city of refuge in the ultimate sense, but these cities seem to me also to represent something of the corporate nature of the Lord Jesus in His church. It is true that Saul of Tarsus found his refuge in Christ, but the man-slayer, he who had given his consent for the slaying of that which was of Christ,

he who had been opposed to the Lord Jesus even unto death, he found his refuge in Christ. But you notice the Lord Jesus did not give him a full answer, any full satisfaction until he had gone to the assembly at Damascus, "Go into Damascus, and there you will be told all the things which are appointed for you to do." And when he went into Damascus among the Lord's people, the Lord's word found him and he arose and was baptised, his sins were washed away and the Lord sealed unto him peace and pardon there in Damascus. And what I mean by this is to follow into the book of Joshua where the Levites are in possession of the cities of refuge, and to see that the Lord would provide in His people a priestly ministry in which there is found a covering, there is found a refuge, there is found a deliverance, a safety: the Lord in the midst of His people to deliver the harassed one, the pressed one, the driven one, to deliver from the accuser.

Now that works two ways. For such a one, the Lord would provide amongst His truly spiritual people a ministry of intercession, a priestly ministry where they may be delivered from the oppressor, the pursuer, the condemner, the accuser, the one who would harass and persecute and bring down under judgment, condemnation and death; the Lord would provide for such a one among His own people a means of grace for their succour and protection. "Go into Damascus", seek that priestly ministry, seek that succour among the Lord's people. If you sit outside, if you detach yourself, if you keep away, if you go off, the pursuer will pursue, the accuser will accuse. But come right in, right into the midst and call for that Levitical ministry among the Lord's people in virtue of the shed blood, for the Levites had that ministry entrusted to them in virtue of the shed blood for the sins, to pray for you.

We know some of the Lord's children who come under accusation, and the tendency has been to cut themselves off, to wander about alone. They have been going on like that month after month in an endless course of accusation, condemnation, pressed down, slain, and if only they would come right in and let the saints compass them about, that might be their way of deliverance from the accuser. Now, remember that, if ever you are tempted that way, and if that might be the attitude of any of the Lord's people, that is the Lord's provision, "Go into Damascus". The Lord fulfils His priestly ministry through His saints, to deliver from the accuser. And it works the other way also beloved; there ought to be maintained a strong ministry in the behalf of such. We should recognise that. It is given to us to be, like Him, a city of refuge for the oppressed, that we are entrusted with a ministry for the deliverance of the harassed ones on whose heels the accuser has hard pressed, to receive them into our spiritual habitation, and succour them, and compass them in the Lord. Remember that ministry being committed to us, it is in the Lord, it is in our power to save many from being dragged off to death by reason of some accusation, something that they never meant, unpremeditated but into which they have fallen, and immediately the accuser pounces upon that ground to destroy. It is given to us to exercise ministry in the behalf of such. The Lord give us grace to fulfil, to maintain that ministry, for these cities of refuge are Levitical cities, they belong to the priests of the Lord.

There is this further truth and word of exhortation in this connection, that the grace of God, which is in Christ Jesus, should also be in us in the same way of operation: "Father, forgive them." I am so glad that at least there was one man in the New Testament who had that same grace in his heart as was in the heart of the Lord Jesus, "Lord, do not charge them with this sin." The apostle, who had good reason to remember this truth, writing to the Roman believers said, "Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,' says the Lord. Therefore, 'If your enemy hungers, feed him; if he thirsts, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head.'" That is an echo of the grace of God in Christ in our hearts.

I do not know how necessary a word like that is. I do not know if you are ever driven to give back something equal to what you get, to answer in the same tone and same spirit, to adopt carnal weapons. I was thinking today of a dear man I knew years ago in America, to whom the Lord spoke very much and very really, to draw him on into fuller knowledge of Himself and higher spiritual life. I know that man was the special object of the word and activity of the Lord away back there years ago. I met him last year when we were there, and I had known he had not gone on with the Lord spiritually, and I was grieved to find that now he had taken up the cause of another man who, whether he had been misrepresented or rightly represented in all colours (that is not for me to say), he had taken up this man's case and was going to law against Christians and fighting furiously with carnal weapons, and tried to draw me into the fight. I had to say, "My brother, the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty through God." And what are they? They are not the law courts; they are not human ways, man's ways of becoming vindicated. They are love - is there a mightier weapon in the universe than that? What has conquered you and me? The love of God. What has won the greatest triumphs this world has ever seen? Not the sword, but the love of God. They are mighty through God: forbearance, patience... these are difficult weapons to become accustomed to, but they are mighty. "All who take the sword will perish by the sword," said the Lord Jesus. Beloved, be sure that if we take up carnal weapons we shall be slain by carnal weapons, we will fall to carnal weapons.

Why is the Lord saying this? I do not know; it has been on my heart. I have been thinking of Nabal, Abigail and David. Nabal to whom David had been very good and very kind and in an hour of present need David sent to him for help, and Nabal, being the man that he was - his wife said, "he is such a son of Belial you cannot speak to him" - turned on David, refused his request, repudiated any obligation. And David girded on his sword, called his men and set out to reap vengeance upon Nabal. But Nabal's wife Abigail heard and she gathered together all the provisions that she could and laded the animals and set out to meet David in accosting her husband. She admitted all the wrong about him and yet (oh the wisdom of it!) saying to David words to this effect, "David, you will do your own self more harm than you will do Nabal if you take that course. If you reap your vengeance on Nabal you will be the one who will regret it; it will do you far more injury than Nabal. For all the days of your life you will be unhappy about being wrathful. You have good occasion to be wrathful it is true, every bad thing you can say about my husband is true, and yet you have far higher interests to serve than gratifying your own vengeance; you are called to something higher than that David." And the wisdom of this woman prevailed with David. He said, "If you had not spoken to me like that there would have been nothing left of Nabal", and then David thanked the Lord for the wisdom of Abigail. He thanked the Lord that he had been delivered from that.

You and I will be the sufferers if we let our spirit of revenge lead us out in any way to this gratification; we will suffer if we adopt carnal methods. It will be true that if we take the sword to live by it, we will perish by it. He gave place unto wrath. "Therefore if your enemy hungers, feed him; if he thirsts give him a drink." That is victory. That is triumph. That puts the Spirit of the Lord Jesus into our hearts, and the result is, what? So often just this wonderful thing, that the one upon whom we might have reaped vengeance, is saved, and instead of being an avenger of blood we ourselves have become a city of refuge. It is far better to be a city of refuge than an avenger of blood. In which position do we stand? One who pursues, or a city of refuge? The Lord Jesus, had He exercised His powers of judgment against His enemies, would have been an avenger of blood, but He chose rather to pray for their forgiveness and became a City of Refuge. Which are we?

Now I am not going to say any more than just this, but what I feel to need myself, what I feel to be the need in a far greater way for the Lord's children, especially distinctive companies of the Lord's children gathered together in fellowships and assemblies here and there in order that they might

approximate more fully to the likeness of the Lord Jesus, the great need is for more love. Do you not feel the need of that? I do for myself, and I do covet for the Lord's people above everything else, a wonderful spirit of love.

Criticism, suspicion, questionings, doubtings, distance, aloofness, all these and many other things just destroy our usefulness to the Lord and rob us of many precious opportunities, and stand entirely in the way of our own spiritual progress. We may have a wonderful lot of knowledge, but knowledge puffs up. Love builds up, and if we really want to be built up we are not going to be built up by knowledge, we are going to be built up by love. That means the Lord can give us so much more of His precious unveiling. If we have more love be sure that revelation will come along the line of love, and then the Lord can give us to fulfil much more mighty potent ministry on behalf of other souls if we have love. There is all the difference between having truth about delivering souls and trying to exercise that truth and getting nowhere, and having love which does it. It is not our getting down on our knees with a difficult case in the middle and beginning to exercise ourselves in a lot of doctrine about delivering souls from the devil. The Lord does not do it that way. A city of refuge is a city of grace, and for others to get deliverance is not for them to come to a place where there is a lot of wonderful teaching; it is to come into a place where there is a lot of wonderful grace. Oh, that we might be a true city of refuge! That is, those who really are harassed might know this is a place for their succour and their deliverance, not because we have light but because we have grace. What is true for the company must be true for us individually.

The Lord just follow that into our hearts, and if we cry for anything at all, let it be for more love, for grace. Grace is the thing by which the Lord has accomplished His purposes and that is how it will always be.