

Will You Go Free Today?

Deuteronomy 4:41-43

Years ago, there was a man cutting an oak tree down in a forest. He brought his neighbor with him for help. This was back in the days when men used axes instead of chainsaws to fell trees. So, as you can imagine, it took quite some time to get the job done. The man and his neighbor took turns chopping and resting. Toward the end of the day, as the job was nearing the end, the man slipped as he went to strike the oak tree and the axe handle broke, sending the axe head flying in the direction of his neighbor. Sadly, before he could warn the neighbor, the axe head struck the man in his temple. I'll save you the gore, but the neighbor was still breathing, even though he was unconscious and bleeding profusely. Immediately, the man bandaged his neighbor's wound with his own shirt and picked him up to carry him to town for medical care.

The trip to town was not long but it felt like an eternity. The man kept telling his neighbor, "Stay with me, buddy. I'm gonna get you some help." As they arrived at the town, the man carried his neighbor into the doctor, where the medical team took over with the care. The man sat outside of the doctor's office, waiting to hear the news. By then the neighbor's family had arrived and they were waiting with the man. Second became minutes, minutes became hours, until finally, the doctor emerged, and everyone could tell that the news was bad. The doctor told the family, "We did everything we could to save him, but he's gone." The family wailed in sorrow while the man who brought the neighbor in broke down beside them.

For a while, it was only tears, then, brother of the neighbor looked the man in his eyes, and through the tears, he said, "This is all your fault. You killed my brother. If you would not have slipped, he would still be here. Why are you still here and not him? You are the one that deserved to die, not my brother." The neighbor's wife tried to calm her brother-in-law down, but his anger continued to grow. Eventually, the man decided that it would be best for him to leave, but as he left, the brother screamed, "You're gonna pay for this!"

Rattled, the man went home, terrified of the mob justice that he might face. You see, he lived in a land where a relative of someone who had been killed could avenge their relative's death with impunity. If his neighbor's brother decides to avenge his death, the man who killed him, even though it was an accident, would have to flee to escape the vengeance. But where would he flee?

In his particular area, there were three places he could go for refuge from the avenger. In fact, these areas were often called "cities of refuge." He lived on the eastside, so this meant that he could go to Bezer, since he was from the land of the Reubenites. Had he been a Gadite or a Manassite, he could have gone to Ramoth in Gilead or Golan in Bashan. But since the man was a part of the Reubenites, he would have to go to Bezer if he wanted to escape the vengeance of his neighbor's brother.

These three areas were prepared by Moses right before the people of Israel entered into the Promised Land. In fact, we can read about it in **Deuteronomy 4:41-43**...

If the man was caught outside of Bezer, he could be killed before his trial. But, as Deuteronomy 4:41-43 taught the people, their lives could be saved if they fled to the cities of refuge that God called Moses to set aside as a provision for people in his situation. This would allow the elders in his city time to adjudicate the situation.

In one sense, the provision of the cities of refuge were a gift from God. In another sense, though, the man could be sentenced to a life of exile away from family and friends because of his unintentional action that led to the death of his neighbor. In the case of the man in our story, he fled to Bezer to escape the revenge of his neighbor's family.

So, what was it about these "cities of refuge" that allowed the man in our story to flee to them for protection?

Well, for starters, these cities of refuge belonged to the Levites, the priestly tribe of Israel, thus making these cities a “sacred place,” often accompanied with an altar for sacrifice. Those who would take refuge in such places would often refer to this as “sanctuary.” A “sanctuary” is a place of refuge, where someone can flee until justice can truly be provided for the accused. We see people like Adonijah, the son of Solomon, doing this in places like 1 Kings 1:50-53, where he “takes hold of the horns of the altar,” begging for Solomon to be merciful to him after planning a takeover.

With an altar and a Levitical priest present, serving the LORD, people sought the LORD to be their refuge. We see this repeatedly in the Psalms where the LORD is identified as refuge for the people (Cf., Ps. 17:8; 59:17). Thus, as the people fled to these Levitical cities, which were equipped with priests and altars, they were, in a very real sense, recognizing that the LORD alone could protect them and defend them.

So, the man in our story, flees to the Levites and their altar in Bezer, seeking sanctuary in order that he might not die at the hands of his neighbor’s avenger. And there he waits until the day of his trial.

The day of the trial comes, and the elders of the city and the Levitical priests determine that based upon the evidence, the man was not guilty of intentional murder and should not be put to death. The man was relieved, but the family of the neighbor who had died understood that the rule of the land was an “eye for an eye.” The death of the neighbor could not simply be forgotten as if his life was not valuable. So, while the man was not guilty of intentional murder, he must return to the city of refuge to live out the rest of his days. He cannot go free. The law requires an atonement, a ransom of equal value. No degree of money or property could suffice to satisfy the demand.

So, the man returns to Bezer as one “not guilty” of the accusation of intentional murder but still in debt for the life that he took that day in the forest while cutting down an oak tree with his neighbor. He gets back to town, starts to settle into his rhythm of life in exile from all he had grown to love and know. I assume he got to know the other people in town. Many of them probably had similar stories. They talked about the life they once knew. In the case of our story, the man was a woodworker among shepherds. When he and his neighbor had gone to cut down the Tabor Oak tree, his intention was to use some of the wood for fuel, but the rest would be used for constructing a new home for his daughter and her family. He dreamed of the day of building his baby girl that home, but in instant, those dreams vanished. He was an innocent man living among a mix of innocent and guilty men from his homeland. His heart longed for home, but he was not free to return. For, his presence would have brought guilt upon his community.

Day after day carried on in the new normal of his life, until one day, he got a knock at the door. It was a new friend that he had made in Bezer. The friend asks him, “Have you heard the news?” The man says, “What news?” The friend replies, “Last night, in his sleep, the high priest died.” Bewildered, the man says to his friend, “Well, that’s unfortunate. I hate to hear that.” But then the friend says, “Don’t you know what that means?” Intrigued, the man shakes his head, signaling “no.”

The friend then asks, “Don’t you remember what Moses taught us?” The man had been taught the law of Moses growing up, but he was no expert.

Perceiving the confusion, our man’s friend says, “Moses taught us that “the accused must stay in the city of refuge until the death of the high priest; only after the death of the high priest may they return to their own property.” (Numbers 35:26-28) The friend says again, “Man, we are free! The high priest has died. We can go back home. His death functions like a ransom for those of us who have been trapped in this city of refuge.”

“Because the High Priest died, we are free to leave!”

As you can imagine, the man who once seemed destined to stay in Bezer till the end of his life began frantically packing his things and preparing for his journey home. He couldn't wait to have a meal with his wife. He couldn't wait to play with his children again. He couldn't wait to see his friends. He might even build his daughter that home after all. He was receiving his life back. The LORD had provided a way for the man to be redeemed and set free, and he wasn't going to miss the chance!

Conclusion

If we have eyes to see and ears to hear this morning, in these laws regarding the cities of refuge, we will behold how God, from the beginning, was preparing us to see how He would one day set us free, just like the man in our story.

But our story is a little different. Whereas the man in our story was found to not be guilty, Scripture declares that we are all guilty of sin and the wages that our sins deserve is the wage of death. We deserve God's justice, but we have been offered God's grace, because the Great High Priest, Jesus Christ Himself, has died in our place to set us free!

As the author of Hebrews tells us, “But when Christ came as high priest of the good things that are now already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not made with human hands, that is to say, is not a part of this creation. He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption.”
(Hebrews 9:11-12)

Because Jesus, the Great High Priest, has died and rose again, you and I can go free today!

We no longer have to live in fear of judgment or the pain of guilt and condemnation, because Jesus has done what we could not do in ourselves.

He has paid the ransom for our freedom!

The only question that remains this morning is “Will you go free today?”

Will you leave the cities of refuge that you have fled to in an attempt to escape the penalty of your sin and recognize this morning that the price for your freedom has been paid?

You can go free today! Free from sin and shame and fear and guilt, because the who Son sets free, is free indeed!

Will you go free today?