

THE CITIES WHERE GATES WERE NEVER CLOSED  
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"And they appointed Kedesh in Galilee. . . and Shechem in mount Ephraim. . . and Hebron in the mountain of Judah. . . And on the other side Jordan by Jericho eastward. . . Bezer in the wilderness. . . and Ramoth in Gilead. . . and Golan in Bashan" (Josh. 20:7-8).

Among the cities of Israel six were unique. They were specially selected to become havens of refuge for those whose lives were threatened. All were strategically situated; three were on the west side of the river Jordan and three on the east. They belonged to the tribe of Levi and each had its resident priest. Access was obtainable night or day, for the gates were never closed. According to Israel's legal system, when a person was inadvertently killed, his relatives were permitted to avenge the death of the deceased. The law supported the idea of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, and a person accused of murder was in great danger, even when the death had been accidental.

This procedure seemed to be unjust, and to rectify the situation six cities were chosen to become havens of refuge where those endangered could seek the protection of God and His priest. The accused was required to remain until his case could be examined by the "congregation" (city council), or until the priest died. Afterward, if he were innocent, he was permitted to return to his family.

Bible students believe this provision was a foreshadowing of the Savior, who was to become a refuge for sinners. God predicted, "And a man shall be as an hiding place from the wind, and a covert from the tempest; as rivers of water in a dry place, as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land" (Isa. 32:2). David expressed a similar thought when he wrote, "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble" (Ps. 46:1). An illuminating statement was made by the writer to the Hebrews, who said, "That by two immutable things, in which it was impossible for God to lie, we might have a strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us" (Heb. 6:18). After hiding from a storm in Somerset, England, the poet Toplady wrote:

Oh, safe to the Rock that is higher than I  
My soul in its sorrows and conflicts would fly:  
So sinful, so weary, thine, thine would I be,  
Thou blest Rock of Ages, I'm hiding in Thee.

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Many of the names found in the Bible are of great interest, but none are more attractive than those given to the cities of refuge. The Promised Land was not a large country, but God chose those remarkable centers so that in emergencies there was always one city within easy reach. It would be interesting to know whether God deliberately named those places. The cities of refuge were called Kedesh, Shechem, Hebron, Bezer, Ramoth, and Golan, but each name had a special meaning. If they were meant to reveal attributes of the Savior, the list becomes exceptionally interesting.

Kedesh (The Sanctuary). . . A Refuge for the Unholy

It is fitting that this should be the first of the cities mentioned; it means the sanctuary, and no person could enter the house of God without seeing the altar! This was the dwelling place of the Almighty who was the personification of purity and holiness. When God descended upon mount Sinai, the people of Israel were forbidden to touch the sacred hill. It was astonishing when God revealed a way sinners could enter into His presence and be sure of His protection. There was an outstanding difference between the Old Testa-

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ment refuge and that supplied through the redeeming death of God's Son. The offenders who fled to Kedesh were only guilty of an accidental death, a regrettable occurrence for which they could not be blamed. People who were criminals, who had deliberately committed murder, were not welcomed in any city of refuge. When God through His grace supplied redemption for mankind, limitations were removed.

The vilest offender who truly believes;  
That moment from Jesus a pardon receives.

When Paul wrote to Timothy, he said, "For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Tim. 2:5). The apostle John wrote the words of the Lord, "I Jesus have sent mine angel to testify unto you these things in the churches. I am the root and the offspring of David, and the bright and morning star. And the Spirit and the bride say, Come. And let him that heareth say, Come. And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take of the water of life freely" (Rev. 22:16-17). The welcome given by the Savior supersedes all others. Our High Priest, unlike those of the Jewish world, will never die. When He offers sanctuary, it is limitless.

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Shechem (The Shoulder)... A Refuge for the Unsure

Archeologists have uncovered evidence which proves the ancient city of Shechem was protected by massive fortifications. Its inhabitants controlled most of the trade routes of northern Canaan, and it is believed the name related to strength. Even in modern times women carry water pots on their shoulder. God said of His servant, Eliakim, "And the key of the house of David will I lay upon his shoulder; so he shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open" (Isa. 22:22). The same prophet wrote of the Messiah, "For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace" (Isa. 9:6). Shechem was a fortress in which people were secure. It was situated about thirty miles north of Jerusalem and could be reached easily by people in urgent need. It offered protection to the weak and confidence to the fearful.

It is interesting to remember that shepherds carried their weak or injured sheep on their shoulders. The strength of the men overshadowed the weakness of the animals. Alone and unaided the sheep were victims of predators, but upon the shoulder of its guardian, even the weakest lamb was safe. Men who distrusted their own capabilities looked at the fortifications of Shechem and were reassured that once inside, they would be safe. After many years the Lord Jesus came to earth and provided a greater refuge than had ever been known. He assured the disciples that His arms could protect them from all danger, even the gates of hell would not prevail against His kingdom. The text, "Be still and know that I am God," should strengthen every soul whose faith is in the Rock of Ages.

Hebron - Fellowship)... A Refuge for the Unwanted

"These were the cities appointed for all the children of Israel, and for the stranger that sojourneth among them" The followers of Moses belonged to an exclusive society; foreigners were seldom welcomed unless they came to trade. The Hebrews believed they alone were the chosen of God, and people of other nations were constantly reminded

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of that fact. It was significant when God made provision to extend His grace to all nations. Was this a foreshadowing of the era when even Gentiles would cease to be strangers and become fellow heirs of

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the commonwealth of Israel? Paul wrote to the Christians in Ephesus saying, "Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God" (Eph. 2:19). The entire district occupied by the people of Hebron was fertile and crops were plentiful. "A large number of springs and wells dot the landscape, making it certain of occupation.... Apple, plum, fig, pomegranate, apricot and nut trees are produced in abundance. Grapes, melons and several vegetables are produced in profusion from the rich soil of valley and terrace" (quoted from the Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible, Vol. 3, p. 108). Hebron was a very wealthy and important place; there was sufficient of everything for its residents. It was a city of fellowship.

When considering this ancient place, it is wise to recall how the Savior said, "I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me, shall never thirst" (John 6:35). Christ is truly Hebron for His people. He is pleased when people seek shelter within His embrace and enjoys communion with them. Unlike the Jehovah of Old Testament ages who was remote, mysterious, and sometimes forbidding, the Lord Jesus Christ lives within His people and appreciates their fellowship.

Bezer (The Stronghold)... A Refuge for the Unable

Little is known of this city except for the fact that it was chosen by Moses to be one of the three cities of refuge on the east of Jordan. "Then Moses severed three cities on this side Jordan toward the sunrising; That the slayer might flee thither, which should kill his neighbor unawares, and hated him not in times past; and that fleeing unto one of these cities he might live: Namely, Bezer in the wilderness in the plain country, of the Reubenites; and Ramoth in Gilead, of the Gadites; and Golan in Bashan, of the Manassites" (Deut. 4:41-43).

It is generally accepted that this name means a stronghold, and this might imply that since it was built in the plain country, without it the inhabitants would have been defenseless. Apparently there were no mountains in the vicinity; everything was flat, and enemies could easily have conquered the people. This place of refuge was formidable, and any man who sought sanctuary within its walls was safe.

If this city were meant to be a type of Christ, then its message was unmistakable. The psalmist said, "Thou art my hiding place; thou shalt preserve me from trouble; thou shalt compass me about

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with songs of deliverance" (Ps. 32:7). David also said, "Thou art my hiding place and my shield: I hope in thy word" (Ps. 119:114). When Paul wrote to the Colossians he reminded them, "Your life is hid with Christ in God" (Col. 3:3). Throughout his lifetime David knew what it meant to be sheltered by Jehovah. He wrote, "For in the time of trouble he shall hide me in his pavilion" (Ps. 27:5). "The Lord is my strength and my shield; my heart trusted in him, and I am helped: therefore my heart greatly rejoiceth; and with my song will I praise him" (Ps. 28:7). A shield came between its owner and the aggressor; God is a shield to all who trust Him; He stands between the soul and the threatening enemy.

Ramoth (Exalted: The High Place)... A Refuge for the Unworthy

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This city was also called Ramoth-Gilead. A. R. Fausset says the name means "the heights of Gilead because it was a fortress commanding the countryside, and for which during history, the armies of Israel fought repeatedly." The fortress was upon high ground, and any man seeking refuge within the walls would need to turn his eyes heavenward and climb until he reached his desired haven.

It is never wise to read into a text something not there, but David said, "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help. My help cometh from the LORD, which made heaven and earth. He will not suffer thy foot to be moved: he that keepeth thee will not slumber. Behold, he that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep. The Lord is thy keeper" (see Ps. 121:1-5). The refuge of every Christian is found in Christ. Luke described how Peter and the apostles addressed the council. "Then Peter and the other apostles answered and said, We ought to obey God rather than men. The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom ye slew and hanged on a tree. Him hath God exalted with his right hand to be a Prince and a Savior, for to give repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins" (Acts 5:29-31). The Lord is the High Priest of His people, and He said, "Him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out" (John 6:37). The writer to the Hebrews said, "Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need" (Heb. 4:16).

Golan (Exile or Separated)... A Refuge for the Undesirable

"They gave Golan in Bashan with her suburbs, to be a city of refuge for the slayer" (Josh. 21:27). It is said they sanctified or

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separated the cities; that is, they set them apart. The name might be interpreted as "a place for exiles; or for people unable to find refuge elsewhere." The crime of which they were accused and the possibility of involvement with bloodshed made the manslayers undesirable in most places in Israel. It may be a matter of conjecture whether this had any meaning for the untouchables who met the Savior. Matthew recorded a moment when this was vividly portrayed. "When he [Jesus] was come down from the mountain, great multitudes followed him, And, behold, there came a leper and worshiped him, saying, Lord, if thou wilt, thou canst make me clean. And Jesus put forth his hand and touched him, saying, I will; be thou clean. And immediately his leprosy was cleansed" (Matt. 8:1-3). All lepers were exiles in Israel; the presence of the dreaded disease expelled them from the presence of people. They were compelled to live in hovels away from centers of habitation, and even their food, if it were supplied by relatives, had to be left at an isolated place and collected later by the outcasts. Association with healthy people was strictly forbidden. There was no city of refuge to which a leper could flee; he had no hope of survival.

It was interesting that one of the six cities of refuge should be called "a city for exiles." Yet that was precisely what the manslayer became when a charge of murder was brought against him. Surviving members of the deceased man's family would insist on avenging the death of their loved one, and, apart from the cities of refuge, there were no hiding places in the nation. If the endangered man refused to avail himself of the offered salvation, he had no defense against his enemies. Abner, who was in that predicament, was only a step from safety, but he refused to move and died in the gateway of Hebron (2 Sam. 3:27). He did not consider it would have been better to live within the city than to be buried outside. The writer to the Hebrews asked a question for which there has never been an answer. "How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation?" (Heb. 2:3).

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