

Study Guide for the Central Church of Christ

March 24, 2019

To Adult Teachers:

March 24, we will study Numbers 35:9-34. Discussion questions are:

1. The crime of murder is described in Numbers 35:16-21. What conditions had to exist for a death to be considered murder? What was the punishment for murder? How was that punishment to be carried out?
2. Numbers 35:22-25 describes deaths that are not considered murder. What distinguishes these instances from the crime of murder? How were these cases to be handled?
3. From Numbers 35:26-29, what protections did the cities of refuge provide to those accused of murder? What were the limits of those protections?
4. In Numbers 35:30, there is another protection for the accused. What is it? Why is this an important protection?
5. Read Numbers 35:31-34. Under what condition could the accused leave the cities of refuge? Why do you think God designated this circumstance for freeing the accused?
6. In what ways is the church like a city of refuge? From what kinds of things are people seeking refuge today?
7. Has there ever been a time in your life when the church has been like a city of refuge to you? How did people in the church behave to let you know that the church was a “safe place” for you?
8. How could this church be more of a “safe place” for people? What difference could that make in the lives of troubled people?

Sermon: *A Place of Refuge*

Numbers 35:9-34

As we consider the wilderness journey of God’s people in OT, we have a clear indication of God’s care for them in Numbers 35, where God gave detailed instructions for the establishment of cities of refuge: Numbers 35:9-12.

1. A little background is in order. If a person was killed, that person’s next of kin was allowed to track down and kill the person responsible. He was called the *goel*, the avenger of blood. And that person would be relentless in his pursuit. Think of Inigo Montoya in *The Princess Bride*. Repeated endlessly: “Hello. My name is Inigo Montoya. You killed my father. Prepare to die.” Imagine spending your life on the run from someone like that. That’s where the city of refuge comes in. A person accused of murder could run to a city of refuge: *Read* Joshua 20:4-6.
2. This system anticipated modern legal safeguards:
 - a. Principle of innocent until proven guilty.
 - b. Right to a fair and impartial trial.
 - c. Punishment that fits the crime

- (1) Could be premeditated murder. In that case, the murderer is marched out of the city of refuge and handed over to the avenger of blood. His death at the hands of the avenger is considered to be his just penalty.
 - (2) Could have been manslaughter. Numbers 35 speaks of a person who gets into a fight and shoves another person, who falls and hits his head on a rock and dies.
 - (3) Could have been result of negligence. Example in Deuteronomy 19 of the axe head that flies off and hits another.
 - (4) In either of these cases, the accused can stay in city of refuge and be protected from avenger of blood. Upon death of the high priest, he is free to return to his home; avenger of blood is not allowed to touch him.
3. I cannot read about these cities of refuge without being reminded of the vision I have for the church, and specifically for this congregation. There are multiplied thousands of people in our community who are being pursued relentlessly by events from their past.
 - a. Often, they are pursued by the consequences of their own sins. Guilty consciences, broken relationships, enemies who seek to harm them, financial burdens, broken dreams, addictions, temptations that they keep giving in to.
 - b. At other times, they are pursued by the judgmental voices of others: I told you what would happen. If you hadn't been so stupid, this wouldn't have happened. Or if you had really tried, things would have turned out better. You can't do anything right. You're incompetent. Look at the mess you've made of things.
 - c. Still others are pursued by voices of condemnation within. They don't need any accuser other than themselves. Look at the messes you've made in your life. Remember the life you envisioned for yourself? Look at what you've done to it. It's all your fault and you know it.
 4. The church is designed to be a place of refuge for all kinds of people.
 - a. A place that's open and accessible. Deuteronomy 19 tells us that the cities were to be spread throughout the land so that one would be within a day's journey from anywhere in the land. Roads were to be built to each city. Later tradition stated that the roads were to have bridges over rivers and culverts over ravines. They were to be repaired every year after the rainy season. At each intersection along the road, there was to be a sign with the word "refuge" painted on it large enough for a person to read it while running. And that's what I want for this church. From the guest parking spots to the architecture, to the welcome of our people, I want this place to be accessible. I want community groups to use this building. We steer away from lots of religious jargon that may not be understood. We value simplicity, because we don't want anyone to feel that they have to master some kind of secret knowledge just to come in. We have small and medium-sized groups that are designed to give new people places to connect. My vision is that we have a reputation in the community so that anyone can say, "I think I could go there and be accepted." Not "I'm not holy enough" or "the walls would fall in."
 - b. A place where mercy overcomes judgment. We live in a world that values vengeance. "I don't get mad; I get even." If you do something I don't like, I'm going to assume the worst about your motives. I'll fill in the blanks in the way that makes you out to be a villain, and I'll see to it that you pay. We live in a world filled with grudges, resentments, hatred, and enmity. My vision for this church is that this will be an island of mercy in a sea of hostility and vengeance. A place where people are given the benefit of the doubt. Where we seek to understand others before we presume to judge them. Where we think the best of each other, not the worst. Where we willingly let go of our desire for vengeance in order to extend the grace of Jesus Christ. We do not pretend that sin does not exist or that it is inconsequential. We do proclaim that there is mercy and grace for all sin.
 - c. A fellowship of refugees. When you came into a city of refuge, you knew you would find understanding, because there were plenty of others who were in the same boat. You were more likely to get a sympathetic hearing there than anywhere else on the planet, because just about

everyone else knew what it felt like to be a fugitive on the run. My vision for this church is that we recognize that all of us have come in from being on the run. All of us are broken people. There are no superior saints here. We're all sinners who have made it to the place of mercy and grace, who owe our lives to that grace we've received. And who dispense grace to others as freely as we have received it.

- d. A place of redemption. There was this interesting provision about the city of refuge: if you had contributed to the death of a person, by negligence or manslaughter, you could not leave the city *until the death of the high priest*. That's not explained in the text, but the reason seems fairly apparent. When someone died an untimely death, a price had to be paid. To not demand some price dishonored the worth of the person who had died. The price for a human life was that the guilty party was to forfeit their own life. But in the city of refuge, the life of the high priest was taken as a substitute. The NT identifies Jesus as our high priest. His death was a substitute for us. He died for us (in our place). We are guilty before God, deserving of punishment. Jesus took our place, took the punishment for us, so we would not have to. That substitution of Jesus for us is called redemption. My vision for the church is a place where redemption through Jesus is proclaimed and celebrated. It doesn't matter what you've done, God has a plan and a purpose for you. He hasn't given up on you, nor will he. He is anxious to proclaim his love for you and use you in a powerful way. How can he do that? Your high priest has died in your place; you are no longer guilty. You are redeemed.