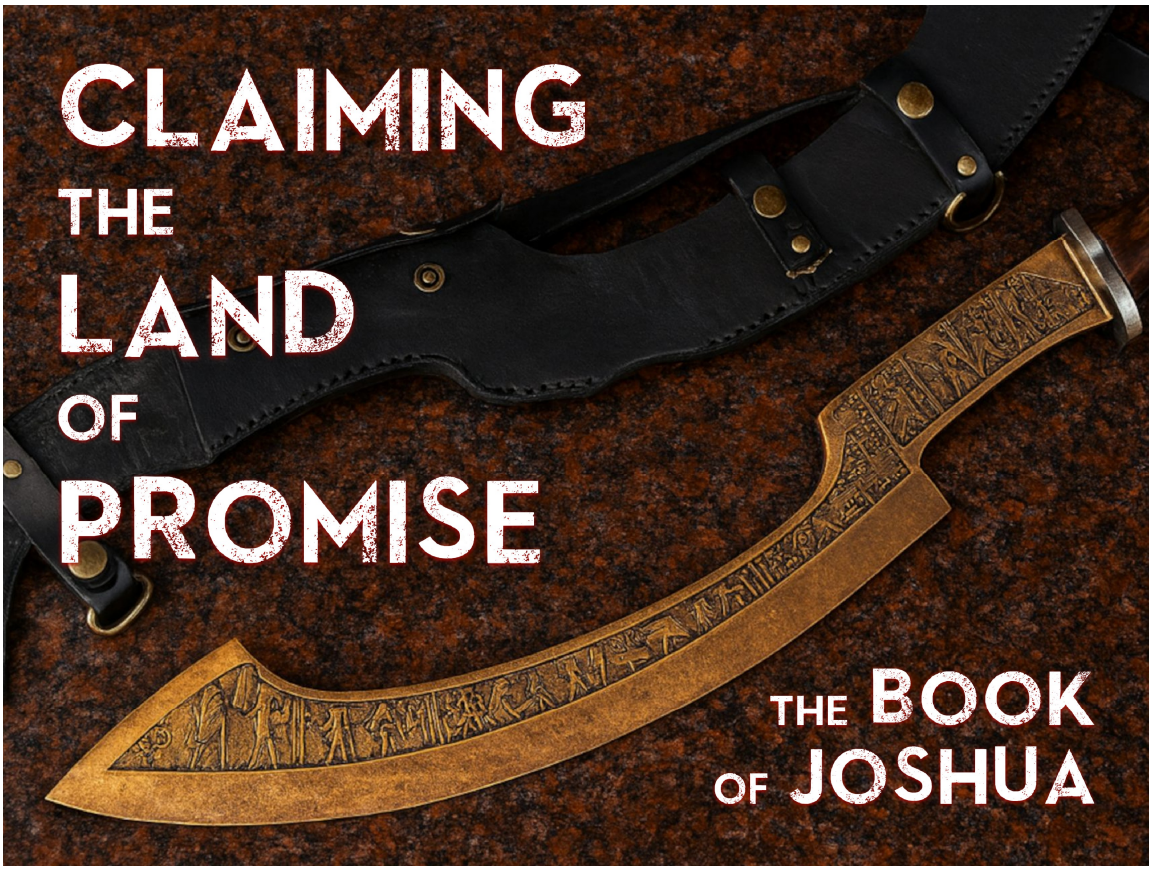


CITY OF REFUGE

Anyone know the expression "Your fave is problematic"?

The phrase was part of a Tumblr blog started 10 years ago as a way of shaming celebrities for things said in the past. The blog's founder, Liat Kaplan, basically wanted to get back at everyone who'd ever hurt her. While she later regretted it (saying it "lacked nuance"), the site is still active and helped create the cancel culture we see today.

Why are such platforms so popular? 2 reasons, I think:

- We've all been wronged by someone and felt the desire to get back at them;
- We all have a tendency to uplay the wrongs of others while downplaying our own.

But the reality is: we've all said or done something that we regret. So where do we go when we're feeling guilty? Or vengeful? Trapped by our mistakes? Or the wrongs of others?

In this chapter we get an answer. An insight into the character of God. And what we are called to follow.

Joshua 20

The cities of refuge were 6 cities within the Promised Land (3 east of the Jordan, 3 west of) … Levitical cities, meaning they were cities where a priest

from the tribe of Levi was living … and places where people could flee if they had inadvertently taken someone's life (what we might call manslaughter today). For those 'oops, I seem to have inadvertently beheaded you' moments.

All of this authorised by Moses in the *Torah:* specifically, in Numbers 35 and Deuteronomy 19.

Now you might be thinking, "But why would they have to flee?" The answer is 'the avenger of blood' – a relative of the deceased, who might take it upon themselves (or be appointed by their family) to avenge the dead. So, the accused had to run to one of these cities, state their case, and be given refuge or sanctuary until a trial was called.

Now this set-up was obviously important on a legal level, especially in the absence of a police force of any kind. But the principles here had spiritual significance too, even back in the OT; principles which find their ultimate, eternal fulfilment in Jesus of Nazareth. There are 4 altogether:

1) Mercy is available. The cities of refuge were God's way of saying, to Israel: "Choose mercy, not vengeance." Because the elders of those cities had to trust the words of the accused, rather than those who wanted him dead (vs4-5); they had to trust in justice rather than public opinion. Which might have made them, well, a bit unpopular!

But mercy wasn't just being extended to the killer; it was being extended to the family of the deceased – to keep them from kicking off a blood-feud. It offered justice to the accused (they were able to seek mercy). And it took power from the vengeful (they would have to allow it).

All of which points to a God who is "compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love" (Psalm 103).

2) Refuge is accessible. Each of these cities was geographically located in such a way that, wherever you were in Israel, you were only ever a day's journey from safety (vs7-8). They even built roads to make it easier – which in the pre-Roman world was quite a statement. You normally had to be royalty to get a road made (they would usually prepare it for you as you approached!).

But in Israel, the accused got a road, too.

What's the point? You are never very far from God and His goodness. Yes, God is beyond us and what we can comprehend, but He is also "close to the broken-hearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit" (Psalm 34). Not only that: your life is as precious to God as a king's.

3) Atonement is achievable. The cities of refuge were a great idea, but the cities themselves were not enough for the person to be free – even if they'd been acquitted. Someone had to die, namely, the High Priest (vs6). Why?

Ancient Rabbis theorised that the High Priest's death was a kind of atonement for all the wrongs done by the people. An innocent person had died in their

place; a line had been drawn. Now in reality, no ordinary life could be offered as a ransom (as Psalm 49 says, "No man can redeem the life of another or give to God a ransom for him"). But what they did was to be a foreshadow of a greater High Priest to come. One who *could* do it.

No prizes for guessing who that might be (we'll get there)!

4) Everyone is acceptable. Finally, we're told that anyone – *anyone* – could access a city of refuge (vs9), no matter who they were. Which in its original context meant Israelite and non-Israelite; neighbour and stranger; friend and yes, even enemy. Because there are no outsiders when it comes to mercy. Not as far as God is concerned.

But even so, there were limits.

Under the Old Covenant, refuge was offered to those who had killed someone unintentionally. Under the New, it is offered to all of us, for *everything.* Now that doesn't mean there aren't earthly consequences to the things we do (and there should be). But it does mean that the weightier issue – our eternal future – is covered by someone else.

Enter: Jesus

Back to where we started. We are by nature 'avengers of blood': we want someone to blame, or we need to suspect a wrong motive, in order to justify our anger. But Jesus went one further, by suggesting we might be killers, too (Matthew 5:21-22). How? With the things that we *say.*

When looked at on that level, some of us here have killed someone's joy. Have killed someone's reputation. Have killed someone's enthusiasm. Have killed someone's friendships. Have killed someone's worth. And while we may not have always *meant* to do it, there will be times when we know that we *did.* Which is why we need Jesus: a refuge greater than any city; an atonement greater than any priest. As it says in Hebrews 7:25: "Therefore, He is able to save completely those who come to God through Him, because He always lives to intercede for them."

But we also need to be *like* Jesus. Church can have a reputation for judgement, condemnation, wagging fingers – "a museum for saints rather than a hospital for sinners." And yes, there may be times when disfellowshipping is necessary. But it is our job, like Israel, to show the world what mercy looks like.

May we as a church endeavour to be that place of mercy, that city of refuge.

May we endeavour to be like Jesus.