

JOSHUA

Lesson 22 - Chapters 20 and 21

We just began to talk about Joshua chapter 20 last week; the subject being the Cities of Refuge, also called the Sanctuary Cities. And I framed it by showing you the parallels between the God-principle and pattern of the sanctuary city as compared to the Bosom of Abraham (we'll delve there a bit more today since without doubt this probably opened up as many questions as it did to bring answers). But in some ways that's what Torah Class is for: to get us to see things in God's Word that perhaps challenges our Christian traditions, while at the same time solidifying our faith in the God of Israel and His Messiah Yeshua.

What a different world is opened up to us when we begin to look at Holy Scripture within the framework of God-established patterns, rather than trying to reason with ourselves or a church council over why God did something a certain way and then balancing that with our current cultural ideas of fairness and morality. If we can only get used to the idea of the Torah being that divine vehicle that announces to us the God-patterns of His character, His universal principles, His will, and His plans for mankind then what we need to be looking for in studying the Bible is this: what **pattern** is being followed in any given situation. Find the pattern and that answers the question of "why?"

Thus regarding Abraham's Bosom as this mysterious spiritual place that is neither Heaven nor Hell, but it is pleasant and intended for the souls of the righteous dead, we find upon reading the Holy Scriptures concerning the Cities of Refuge the pattern that they were following in establishing these sanctuary cities in Canaan. Let me say that another way: Abraham's Bosom was the original spiritual reality that was created BEFORE men ever contemplated the Cities of Refuge. Abraham's Bosom was the God-created pattern that the Cities of Refuge followed, not the other way around. The spiritual is ALWAYS established first, and then the earthly model (if there is to be one) is created to emulate it (as much as is possible considering the very limited ability of anything physical to mimic anything spiritual).

It is probably not entirely accurate to say that one of God's patterns or principles is more important than another, but for the sake of our understanding of The Father and His instructions to us some of His patterns are (practically speaking) more critical to grasp than others. First and foremost to my way of thinking is the pattern that God divides, elects, and separates. From the beginning the Lord established a winnowing process that would eventually lead to an entity the Bible calls The Kingdom of God. This process was not to be brought about by universal inclusion, but rather by careful and well-defined exclusion. The Kingdom of God is a members only club that has the narrowest of gates to enter, and yet establishes the broadest of barriers to intruders or pretenders. This winnowing process of the Lord eventually reducing

the entire world's population to a remnant of people who love and trust and are obedient only to Him I label as the God-pattern of dividing, electing, and separating.

Perhaps the next most critical pattern necessary for our understanding of the Word of God is embodied in what I label as the Reality of Duality. That is the physical processes, protocols, procedures, rituals, observances, and laws that we find in the Bible are direct parallels of spiritual realities that have existed since eternity past. The Wilderness Tabernacle is a very limited earthly model of God's heavenly dwelling place. The Levite Priesthood is a very limited earthly model of God's spiritual servants (angels and cherubim) and their hierarchy as established in heaven. And the Cities of Refuge are a very limited earthly model of a spiritual place of safety for those who love the Lord, and at the same time these cities demonstrated a central part of God's plan of redemption for humankind.

Therefore we're going to continue today to look closely at these Cities of Refuge that the Lord has ordered to be set-up in the Promised Land. And before we continue reading in Joshua, let's read what I wanted to read last week but was too short on time: Numbers 35:9-29.

READ NUMBERS 35:9 – 29

The first thing to understand is that what occurs in Joshua 20 (officially establishing the Cities of Refuge and making them operational) was ordered of Moses by God in the plains of Moab as the Wilderness journey was nearing its end. And naturally verse 10 of Numbers 35 says that this is to happen, "when you cross the Jordan into the land of Canaan..." So Joshua wasn't late in doing this, it was simply time for it to occur.

Now let's go to Joshua 20 and read it.

READ JOSHUA CHAPTER 20 all

Although the CJB opens this chapter with the words, "Adonai said to Y'hoshua", more literally it says, "And YHWH **spoke** unto Y'hoshua". The Hebrew word used here for **spoke** is **dibber**. And though most generally translated as said or spoke, it carries the sense of "drive forward". In other words **dibber** is something said with power and authority and determination; this is not pleasant conversation among friends, or a suggestion, or a friendly reminder. So whenever we see the phrase in the Bible, "and YHWH **dibber** to thus-and-so..." what follows is a very serious and sober command or oracle of God to which we need pay special attention.

And this strong command of the Lord is that NOW, as in RIGHT NOW, Israel is to establish those Cities of Refuge that had been ordained some years earlier when Moses was still alive. And immediately following we are given essentially a shortened version of what we just read in Numbers 35, the PURPOSE of the sanctuary cities. And that purpose is as a safe harbor for those who are being pursued by the Blood Avengers (in Hebrew **go'el hadam**).

Now let's be clear that the concept of relatives taking what we would today call vigilante action against a person who had killed a family member, was a common custom in the world of that

day on a near universal level. The concept was based in tribalism, whereby justice was accomplished either by the family in question or in a few cases by tribal elders. Understand: the very essence of tribalism is that each family, or clan, or tribe is a social entity unto itself; and the tribal laws that have been established were (generally speaking) designed for the family or clan to be the accusers, prosecutors, judges, and (if necessary) executioners. For us in the West that seems so primitive and uncivilized; but in fact that is not only how it WAS, that's still how it IS in much (if not the majority) of the world today.

Due to the rise of Islam, 9/11, and our subsequent wars that we are fighting against terrorists in the Middle East we suddenly have found ourselves face-to-face with forms of tribal justice that sickens us, that we probably thought were all but extinct, but are perfectly normal and usual among billions of people on this planet. Most of these things that we see happening in the news or on Internet videos we'll find in the Bible. That's why I like to use Iraq to explain (at times) what we're seeing in Joshua.

The idea of a holy place being legally recognized as a place of sanctuary may have its roots in the Middle East but it has been part of western civilization right up unto this very day. Most of us are familiar with the idea of churches being seen as sacrosanct and have been traditionally viewed as a place where not only an accused but a convicted person might find refuge from his pursuers, including the police. As we have become a more urban society that right has been pretty much negated; but even so we find in many instances that local law authorities are somewhat reluctant to go into a house of worship to arrest someone if the church authorities ask them not to and behave as their protectors.

In the Bible the purpose of sanctuary was ONLY for a person who had shed the blood of another human; it was not for any other crime or action. Thus when we hear in Iraq of Mosques (Islamic houses of worship) being off-limits sanctuaries we are always outraged when it is invariably men with blood on their hands (those we call terrorists) that openly rush to hide there expecting safety. And we aren't necessarily startled at the idea of a criminal huddling inside a sanctuary, but we ARE upset with the notion of a wanton killer being protected. But in fact what we are experiencing in Iraq is much closer to the Biblical perspective than any other we have likely witnessed. Our problem is that in Islamic law what we think of as murder is in many cases religiously sanctioned killing among tribal or sect members and so is considered justifiable. Therefore the perpetrators are deemed worthy of protection in a holy place.

The Numbers and Joshua definition of who may seek sanctuary in a Levitical City of Refuge is someone who has killed another human but it was without premeditation, without malice, was perhaps in reasonable self-defense, and in many cases purely accidental or caused by a low degree of negligence (a high degree of negligence was considered murder). Even so it was the customary duty of a family member to seek retribution for the death of a relative at the hand of another, no matter what the circumstance (except as the result of judicial punishment). Notice that in no way has the Bible thus far outlawed blood revenge; it was legal and there was no punishment for carrying it out. However the Torah does put limitations on it; the primary one being that the killer (if not guilty of intentional homicide) had a place to go and be safe permanently, provided he could get there before the **go'el** caught up to him and he never left that City of Refuge.

As humans it is near to impossible for us not to ask why God allowed such a system to exist among His people. In many ways it feels like playing the lottery with human life. After all the perpetrator has to be fortunate enough that a City of Refuge was near enough that he could get there faster than the Blood Avenger could locate and kill him. And then this idea that he was safe inside, but outside the Blood Avenger could destroy him. So once again we have to seek the pattern in order to comprehend what is behind this.

I've already explained that the primary God-pattern is Abraham's Bosom. But there is yet another one that plays a significant role in this: the pattern that the spilling of human blood onto the Holy Land makes the land unclean, and the only way for that defilement to be cleansed is for atonement to be made. The Law is that when a man commits murder, the ONLY atonement available is to kill the perpetrator. That is the perpetrators own blood atones for the spilled blood of the victim. But understand: it is NOT that the criminal's blood atones for HIMSELF, it's that atonement is made on behalf of the LAND. Blood illegally shed on the land pollutes the land, and the polluted land defiles the people living in the land. And since God dwells in the Tabernacle on that same land, there is extreme danger that the land will become so polluted that God will no longer dwell among His people. Do you see this slippery slope, now, and the how all of these things tie together?

Therefore even though a person might accidentally kill another, nonetheless human blood has been spilled and the land is polluted, thus something must be done. Blood, spiritually, can be for ONLY one purpose since it is so precious: atonement. To spill blood, even accidentally, is a terrible thing because life is in the blood (not rhetorically but literally). Since God's laws are immutable, the killing of the perpetrator (even if accidental) atones for the defilement of the land caused by the blood of the victim. Yet the Lord saw fit to show mercy on the perpetrator (provided this was not murder) and the result is the establishment of off-limits safe places.

Let's untangle this a little bit, because some of you may be sensing where this is leading and others may not. Consider this: equate the spilling of blood with sin.....any sin. We know that under the Levitical sacrificial system there IS forgiveness of sin because such is clearly stated over and over again. Yet even though there is atonement and forgiveness, there is some element of guilt that stays with the sinner. There are various terms in the Bible used to explain this vague and difficult concept such as the guilt of the conscious, or the guilt nature, or the guilt of the spirit, or perhaps iniquity. In other words, just as Paul struggles to explain, there is a kind of righteousness that obedience to the Law brings us (and that God wants us to have) that is a sort of physical earthly fleshy here-and-now righteousness.....but it has its limits.

But there is another kind of righteousness that man cannot attain, it must simply be imputed to him; he can't attain it, he can't purchase it, he can't merit it by works or deeds or even by obedience to the Law. It is a righteousness that is so high and perfect that only one man ever displayed it: Yeshua of Nazareth. And this man was also God. By trusting in the perfect and highest righteousness of this man, we are said to wear His righteousness as our garment. This garment is a full body garment that covers every aspect of our sinful imperfection. This kind of righteousness knows no bounds or limits. This kind of righteous is a spiritual heavenly righteousness that is durable for all eternity. Even the guilt of the conscious, the guilt nature, the guilt of the spirit, and our iniquity is removed as though it never was.

So when a man sinned before Yeshua appeared, all he apparently could attain was the first kind of righteousness; an earthly kind, desirable for sure, but not of the spiritual variety so to speak and it left some unfinished business between that man and God.

Let's follow this path a little further. We are told that all men have sinned and come short of the glory of God. So when the perpetrator of manslaughter killed that man, it was sin no matter how it happened. There was also blood defilement of the land. What was to be done? Well, if that man was innocent of murder he could run to the safety of a City of Refuge and be held there such that the Blood Avenger couldn't destroy him. But he had to stay there captive indefinitely. Why? Well, first off, he was still guilty of sin. He was responsible for blood defilement of the land. Even though he could make a proper sacrifice and be given that earthly kind of forgiveness and restoration and righteousness that obeying the Law merited, yet there was unfinished business. He could NOT go totally free. If he was to try to free himself prematurely (by leaving the safe sanctuary), then the **go'el** could track him down and kill him. So, for his own protection he was trapped there at one of the Cities of Refuge. UNTIL.....the current High Priest died. Then, some kind of unexplained atonement seemed to happen, and the sinner was now judged as FULLY FREE.

The man who died in righteousness, pre-Jesus; the man who was indeed a sinner but had attained that earthly kind of righteousness (like our perpetrator of manslaughter) was quickly ushered into a safe spiritual place when he died: a place labeled as Abraham's Bosom. He was held captive there for his own good. The place was off-limits to the Destroyer, Satan, who had every legal right to possess him for his sin. Yet, a captive he remained; he did not have full freedom.....UNTIL.

The High Priest had to die, and thus make atonement of a mysterious spiritual kind for him. Jesus our High Priest died, and thus he set the captives of Abraham's Bosom fully free. They could leave, and go and be in eternity with God. Just as the Blood Avenger was legally forbidden from ever again pursuing the manslaughter perpetrator after the High Priest died, so it is that the righteous dead held captive in Abraham's Bosom could be released and the Evil One was legally prohibited from ever pursuing them again.

Now that all this has been fulfilled at the foot of the cross, whatever Abraham's Bosom was, is empty. Even though as Believers we die as forgiven sinners, we do not make a stop there because our High Priest has already died and we don't have to wait for another; we go straight to the full freedom of Heaven, pardon in hand, and no place is a danger to us because God legally forbids Satan from interfering in our lives ever again. And right here in Joshua, in the establishment of the Cities of Refuge, is a physical demonstration of the spiritual reality of God's plan of salvation for mankind. That heavenly plan was being made known long before the Ruach HaKodesh ever visited Mary.

In chapter 20, beginning in verse 7, we get a list of the 6 cities that were given up by the tribes to the Levites to be used as the Cities of Refuge; 3 were in Canaan, 3 were across the Jordan (to the east side of the Jordan). Kadesh of the Galil (the Galilee) was one; another was the well-known Hebrew heritage site of Shechem; and the last one on the west side of the river was Hebron, where several of the Patriarchs were buried.

On the east bank of the Jordan was Betzer, to the south; Ramot, and Golan in the center and north. If that last name sounds a bit familiar (Golan), it should. The infamous Golan Heights that Israel won from Syria in the 6 day war is that place. And naturally, the enemy wants to possess it again and Israel's Prime Minister seems poised to give it to them. Doesn't it just figure that 5 out of the 6 Biblical Cities of Refuge are today reckoned by the Arab world, the UN, and our USA government as rightfully belonging to the Palestinians? I don't think the Lord is impressed.

Lets move on to Joshua 21.

READ JOSHUA 21 all

Here we watch the allotments not just of the 6 Cities of Refuge, but of the 42 more cities that when added together equals the 48 promised to the Levites.

Some commentators see this as the Levites coming forward and demanding their cities, because Joshua and the 12 tribal princes were lax in giving them to the priestly tribe; but I don't think that is at all implied. The Levites were to get cities, not territory. So the territory had to first be secured before the Levites could get their cities.

Recall that the 12 tribes had to fight for their land. Even after Joshua's combined Israeli military finished off all the major Canaanite coalition armies, most the territorial allotments had significant pockets where the Canaanites still held sway. So part of the responsibility of each tribe who took their land inheritance was to finish conquering it. There was one notable exception to this rule: the Levites.

The Levites were not to be engaged in the battle for Canaan. They were God's servants, set-apart for this holy duty. Further, since they were NOT to do military service, whatever land they received for their use had to already be conquered and under Israeli control. So the timing of not receiving their cities and villages until AFTER all the other tribes got theirs is logical. And in fact, as we'll find out much later, not all of the 48 named cities and villages were as yet under Israeli control when they were assigned to the Levites. Even more, some of the 48 would not ever be used as Levite strongholds for that and other reasons.

Eleazar was still the High Priest when the Levites were assigned their cities, and the Tabernacle had been move to Shiloh in the hills of Ephraim. Verse 3 makes a point that is central to the rules and principles concerning the economy of the Levites: the Levites were to get their share OUT OF the shares of each of the 12 tribes. Each of the 12 tribes essentially donated some number of villages and cities to the Levites, symbolically giving back a percentage of what God had given to them.

Now when the verse speaks of the land surrounding each city the purpose was for pasture, not crops. The Levites needed the animals for sacrifices and food, but they weren't supposed to spend their time growing crops. The 12 tribes were supposed to supply all the Levite's needs. Although as we read even starting in Judges that Israel was apparently never very faithful

about this responsibility to the Levites except in spurts. So the Levites eventually did grow crops out of self-preservation.

We're going to speed to a conclusion on this chapter because a map better shows where the Levitical cities were given than these long and laborious word descriptions. Note, however, that the Levites were divide into 3 (actually 4) main clans: Kohath, Gershon, and Merari. The Kohath clans were the first to receive their cities, then Gershon, and finally Merari. Why this order? Because Moses and Aaron were from the line of Kohath, and Kohath was therefore the most dominant with the highest status.

So what we see is that the line of Kohath that branched off and produced the line of Aaron was first, because they were the priests. They held the highest status of all the families. The priests got 13 cities. Then verse 5 speaks of "the rest of the descendants of Kohath"; and they received 10 cities. Who were the "rest of the descendants of Kohath"? Moses' family. Sometimes we forget that even though Moses died, he left many descendants. And these descendants were Levites and thus had assignments regarding the Tabernacle and its care just like everyone in the tribe of Levi.

We read in earlier books of the Torah that the clan of Kohath was assigned the most prestigious duty of transporting the most holy items of the Tabernacle. Well, now you know why they were selected for this high honor; these were Moses' close family relatives.

Here is a map that shows all 48 Levitical cities. Understand that many, if not most, of these are educated guesses. The place names have changed so many times over the centuries, and some locations are now ruins buried under yards of earth and no one even knows they are there. Without doubt new towns have unwittingly been built over some of these spots; hiways have paved over other locations; and farmers plant fields and orchards above fantastic ancient villages that will probably never ever be rediscovered. Once interesting case is the amazing city of Bet Shan; this enormous ruin seems to be practically unending. They keep uncovering more and more. The problem is, they now know that a substantial portion of the ruin lays under the new modern city of Bet Shan and there is no practical way of ever unearthing it without destroying apartments and shopping centers.

The last couple of verses of Joshua 21 is among the most controversial and hotly debated in the Tanach. This is because it seems to say that as of the time of giving the 48 cities and villages to the Levites, all the land was conquered, at rest, and their enemies completely subdued.....as planned. Well, that just isn't so and verses well before this and later say that's not so. How then do we deal with this?

We could spend an entire session here, but won't, because its just too complex. But the bottom line is this: God did His part even if in their disobedience Israel didn't fully do their part.

The state of Canaan at this moment was this: Joshua had defeated the two main coalition forces of the Canaanites: the coalition of the northern kings, and the coalition of the southern kings. Enemies remained, but they were currently subdued and in no position to rally an offensive against Israel. Now if Israel determined to confront an enemy, often there would be a

battle. And often Israel lost that battle; but by now the battles were no longer between a unified Israeli force and a group of Canaanite kings, but instead they were between a certain Israelite tribe and some local Canaanite leaders.

In other cases, like with Tyre and Sidon and the Philistines, Israel just had no current interest in taking them on; and for the most part those 3 nations were resigned to Israel's tribes being where they were, as long as Israel left them alone.

We also know that Joshua (and then the various tribal leaders to follow) found many of the Canaanites kings and lords (who had yet to be conquered) willing to make peace treaties with Israel, and since this offered a path of least resistance Israel succumbed to the temptation. After all, if the choice is between bloody battles with a formidable foe and receiving tribute from a vassal enemy, why not take the money and be happy?

So this was a time of relative peace in Israel. Now for those wondering how God could allow things to go this way, understand that God foretold Moses that this is more or less how it would happen.

CJB Exodus 23:29 I will not drive them out from before you in one year, which would cause the land to become desolate and the wild animals too many for you. 30 I will drive them out from before you gradually, until you have grown in number and can take possession of the land.

God never promised Israel a smooth or fast victory. He said that over time the Canaanites would be destroyed. But what is also usually forgotten is that how and when and at what pace this would come about had everything to do with Israel's obedience to the Lord; and we all have a pretty good idea of just how poorly Israel fared in that regard.

Nonetheless the Lord had fulfilled all His promises to His people; even though enemies were still present, the land indeed was Israel's new homeland, the land was distributed among the sons of Jacob, the Levites were given cities to live in, the Sanctuary Cities were operational, and God dwelled with them.

We'll begin chapter 22 next week.