

QUANTOCK MINISTRIES

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*A Bible teaching and preaching ministry
for the Christian community*

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NUMBERS 35

The children of Israel had arrived in Moab, on the eastern side of the Jordan, opposite Jericho to the west. Moses was reminding them of things that God had taught them after leaving Egypt, especially at Sinai, and here towards the end of Numbers a few odd details are being dealt with.

Verses 1 – 8

The paragraph change after v 5 in the NIV is, in my view, in the wrong place! Here is God's provision for the Levites, the descendants of Levi, those who look after the spiritual life of the nation, including the priesthood. Their call to serve the Lord exclusively meant that they were not to be allocated any tribal territory in the Promised Land. Instead, they were to be given forty-eight towns, spread through the tribal areas, distributed fairly according to the size of each tribe. Not only were they to be given these towns, but they were to be given pasture land outside the wall of each of these towns - four areas, each 1500 feet out from the town's walls and 3000 feet along each of the four compass sides of the walls. In addition, six of these towns (three each side of the Jordan) would act as "Cities of Refuge" even though they were still occupied by the Levites. Clearly, the Levites should be the right people to help those seeking refuge! The fulfilment of this provision is fully described in Joshua 21, and in that chapter please note particularly the final words in v 43 – 45.

Application

The perfect society created by God and enshrined in the Law given to the children of Israel through Moses is a template for subsequent ages. Not that Israel retained that purity – original sin and fallen human nature saw to that! However, the same principles as applied now by the Holy Spirit in the lives of those living under the new covenant in the Church age remains God's perfect desire. Here He calls certain people to serve Him in spiritual ways and gives them appropriate gifts (e.g., 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4 v 11 – 13). The principles can be seen as follows:

- a) Those with spiritual calling and gifting should live among the general population, those they are called to serve, and should not be a separate and exclusive sect. We are to be salt and light in this world, and ambassadors for Christ.
- b) Those whom the Lord calls to serve others should be properly looked after. (NB, this is not special pleading on my part – I was allocated this passage!!) They should enjoy the same general level of living standards as those they serve, not much more, not much less.
- c) By living in special areas within each tribe they were clearly identifiable. The ordinary people knew who they were and where they could be found. I do not believe this is a reason for special vestments, or clothing. In our age when the emphasis for God's people is on the spiritual, the clear identification should be just that – the presence of spiritual anointing and power upon us. In 1 Peter 3 v 3 – 4 the apostle applies this to ladies but it applies to men just as much. Spiritual gifting especially should be clear to see, and shouldn't need any external marks or trumpeting to indicate its presence.
- d) The Levites were to look after those seeking refuge among them. The anointing of God on one and another may give special areas of ministry, but not to be attempted by those without that anointing. It is important for all of God's people to recognise the calling they have and stick to it. None of us should try to assume we can do works to which we have not been called.

Here we have a very important illustration of the interaction between God's justice and God's mercy. The provision of cities of refuge is a wonderful type of, ultimately, the refuge we have in Jesus: "Other refuge have I none, hangs my helpless soul on Thee". God's justice must be met, as it was when God's wrath as well as our sin was laid upon the Lord. Briefly, and here in this passage the scripture can easily speak for itself, deliberate murder is always deliberate murder, and must be dealt with by the death penalty accordingly, as set out in Genesis 9 v 6. But murder must be testified to by a minimum of two witnesses (v30) and cannot be assuaged by a ransom (v31). However, it is sadly the case that a person can cause the death of another unintentionally. A court case must still follow (v24 – 25), but the city of refuge is the place of protection from the avenger. The death of the current high priest is the time for total release from guilt for the unintentional killer (v28).

Application

The whole provision by God of these places of refuge is a principle which acts as a great deterrent to us from rushing to judgement (Romans 2 v 1 – 4). It is also an antidote to some of the harshness we see in other religions and philosophies, and even in some Christian cults and denominations. However, it also illustrates the need to deal with issues that arise and not sweep them under the carpet. Again, the principles can be seen as follows:

- a) The key consideration under the justice of God is motive. He who sees the heart makes the correct judgements, which often may be invisible to a mere human onlooker: "Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?" (Genesis 18 v 25).
- b) It is clear the deliberate act of murder must be punished. But any wilful sin is no different ultimately, because all sin is a capital offence against God's holiness. This is why we must hold to the full nature of the Atonement. We cannot go along with those who regard the doctrine of the Atonement as "cosmic child-abuse". Such people see the crucifixion as basically an act of supreme love and example only. God's wrath as well as our sin was laid upon Jesus, and necessarily so, or justice would not have been met following our sin. This is the full and sole ground of our redemption.
- c) The full and final end of the matter for the inadvertent killer was the death of the current high priest. Our full and final redemption is concluded by the death of our high priest (Hebrews 9 v 11 – 14). Death was still necessary even for the unintentional killer, and in his case that was the death of the high priest. For humanity now all sin, whatever the motive, can only be dealt with by the vicarious death of Jesus, the greatest and ultimate high priest.
- d) The importance of the land, or the ground (v 33 – 34). Psalm 24 v 1 famously states: "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it". Israel suffered captivity for 70 years because the people had not given the land its sabbatical every 7 years as required under the Law, and 70 years were then owing. All land is God's; we are the tenants. It is loaned to us for our stewardship and for our well-being. It needs to be looked after and cared for. When Adam and Eve sinned, the ground suffered the curse afterwards (Genesis 3 v 17 – 18). Innocent blood pollutes the ground and under the Law could only be cleansed by the special cleansing inherent in the unique sacrifices made before God at the inauguration of a new high priest (Exodus 28 and 29, Leviticus 8, and 21 v 10). When Jesus rose from the ground (the tomb) the provision was fully in place for the full cleansing and complete restoration of all creation, which will assuredly happen (Romans 8 v 19 – 22, Revelation 21 v 1, where "new" means "renewed", not "brand new"). This also means, on a national level, we must look after the land given to us as a nation, and be grateful for its beauty and productivity, with good governance and godly thanksgiving.