

Meditations on the Book of Joshua

Joshua 20–21

The Cities of Refuge

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These few examples will suffice to shew that perseverance applies to every detail of christian life. May we know more of it, and so act that when our earthly race is run, we may, like Caleb, receive from God Himself these words of approval: "He wholly followed the Lord his God."

Joshua 20, Joshua 21

THE CITIES OF REFUGE

In connection with these two chapters let us look at Hebrews 6: 18, 20, a passage which evidently alludes to the cities of refuge, such as we find them in Exodus 21: 13 ; Numbers 35; Deuteronomy 21 and Joshua 20, 21.

The types of the Old Testament in their application to the Christian often form contrasts rather than similarities. So it is with the cities of refuge, as we shall see. To apply them solely to the cross of Christ would be to seize their meaning very poorly and imperfectly, for the immediate application of the type, as no doubt most of us know, is rather historical and prophetical. The involuntary murderer prefigures Israel, murderers of Christ "through ignorance." It was of them that the Lord Jesus said on the cross: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." They had not known the day of their visitation. So with Paul: "I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief." (1 Tim. 1: 13) But in another sense both the leaders of the Jews and the people were murderers wilfully, yea, deliberately and knowingly rejecters of God and of His Christ. "This is the heir," said they, "come, let us kill him, and let us seize on his inheritance." (Matt. 21: 38) "We will not have this man to reign over us." (Luke 19: 14) Moreover, it is said that the voluntary murderer must be put to death, and with several other prophecies relating to the Jews, this judgment has been partially fulfilled in the fall of Jerusalem. "The king . . . was wroth: and he sent forth his armies, and destroyed those murderers, and burned up their city." (Matt. 22: 7) But this judgment of the wilful murderer, unduly hidden in the city of refuge (Deut. 19: 11, 12), is in reality yet to come. The Jews, since the rejection of the Messiah, are kept, as at the present time, under the providential care of God, out of their inheritance, and, as another has said, "so to speak under the eye of God's servants, who, like the Levites, having no inheritance, serve as their refuge, understanding their position, and recognising them as being under the protection of God." But the voluntary murderers will be brought forth to fall into the hands of the avenger. Allied with Antichrist, they will become the miserable objects of divine judgment.

As for those who killed unawares, they may recover their lot and inheritance at the time of the change in the priestly office (Joshua 20: 6; Num. 35: 28), that is to say, when the priesthood of Christ after the order of Aaron shall have come to an end, and He will have become a priest for ever after the order of Melchisedec. It would be interesting to follow out in detail this well-known signification of the cities of refuge, but I pass on to the contrast which the type affords when compared with the christian position taken up in Hebrews 6.

The Israelite, a slayer by ignorance, type of the nation at the present moment, flies to the city of refuge with the very uncertain hope of escaping the avenger of blood, and of entering one day into possession of his inheritance from which he is kept out until the death of the high priest, typically the end of the Aaronic priesthood of Christ. Even if he gained the city of refuge, his safety and his reinstatement depended on all sorts of circumstances by which his position was rendered precarious in the extreme. First, on the avenger of blood, for did the manslayer but leave the border of the town for one moment, the avenger of blood on watch had a right to slay him (Num. 35: 26-28); secondly, on the elders of the city (Joshua 20: 4); thirdly, on the judgment of the congregation (Joshua 20: 6), for the death of the manslayer might take place before his.

We may well be struck with the unreliability of the best resources which the law could offer to those who were the least guilty in Israel.

But let us turn now to the blessed resources of grace in Hebrews 6: 18-20. The Christian brought out of Judaism fled also from the judgment which was ready to fall upon the people, but with no uncertain hope; he fled with the purpose of laying hold of the hope set before him.

Moreover the Christian's hope is that of possibly some time entering into the enjoyment of an earthly inheritance, but it is a hope that we lay hold of, that we have, it is the present position of our souls. Moreover, it is no more vague than it is uncertain; it is personified, so to speak. It is a heavenly Christ, the great subject of the Epistle to the Hebrews, a Christ in contrast with the best things that earth could offer, Christ, a Man in glory, the fulfilment of all the counsels and promises of God. This hope (Christ) we have as an anchor of the soul both sure and steadfast; it is made fast to an immovable rock. There is no uncertainty; having laid hold of it, we can no longer be "tossed to and fro, and carried about by every wind of doctrine." And more, we are thereby introduced now into the very presence of God, into the sanctuary itself. It enters into that within the veil, where we find Jesus who has gone in as our Forerunner. Already we are there in peace, whilst waiting to receive the promised inheritance, so soon to be possessed. For this, there is no need as with the