

I. Power in the Gospel

- A. When I was a young pastor, one of my mentors was Pastor Al Smith. Al pastored a big church in urban Chicago... Faith Tabernacle (at the intersection of Grace St and Broadway Ave!!).
1. He told me of the time he was preaching in India, outdoor meetings under a big tent. A thousand people hearing the gospel of Jesus for the very first time.
 2. While Al Smith was preaching, he said he was interrupted.
 3. He told me that all over the seating area, people stood up and started writhing like snakes.
 - a) In that place, many people worshipped a snake idol.
 - b) So these followers of the snake idol stood up and started writhing like snakes while Al Smith was preaching.
 4. "What did you do?" I asked, big eyes, and feeling clueless.
 5. He was charismatics and all that, so I expected him to bind the spirits do some spiritual warfare.
 6. What Al said surprised me.
 - a) Al said, "I just kept preaching the gospel. I just kept talking about the cross of Christ."
 7. Then Al said that the writhing snake worshippers moved into the aisles. They keep writhing like snakes with their arms in the air, and their bodies rocking back and forth.
 8. The he say that's when they started coming toward him... on the stage... while he preached.
 - a) Please don't try that here.
 9. That would creep you out, wouldn't it? You've got devil worshipping snake people writhing their bodies, all over the auditorium, slowly, slowly moving toward you.
 10. "Were you scared?" I asked.
 11. "Maybe a little," he said.
 12. "What did you do then?" I asked.
 13. Al said, "I just kept preaching the gospel. I just kept talking about the Jesus dying on the cross. I kept on inviting lost people to come to Jesus and be saved."
 14. Al said that as the snake people got really close to his stage, something remarkable happened.
 - a) He kept preaching. They kept writhing. They kept coming. Everybody kept watching.
 - (1) It's crazy, right?
 15. "So what happened?" I asked.
 16. Al said, "I kept preaching the gospel, and talking about Christ's victory over sin, and Satan, and death, and hell."
 17. Then he said this,
 - a) "Bill, when those snake worshippers reached the edge of platform where I was preaching Christ, they passed out. Every last one of them fell down, and passed out, and didn't make a sound till I was done giving the invitation, and hundreds of people met the Savior the day."
 - b) Then Pastor Al said something to my 20-something self: "Bill, preach the gospel. There's power in the gospel."

II. Sermon

- A. That's our plan, right?
- B. Each of us is here today because somewhere, somebody told us about Jesus. Some body loved us. Somebody answered our questions. Somebody prayed for us.
- C. Aren't you glad for the people who told you about Jesus Christ?
- D. Would you think with me for a few moments on the topic,

III. Clearing the Way to Refuge

- A. *The LORD said to Joshua, "Now tell the Israelites to designate the cities of refuge, as I instructed Moses. Anyone who kills another person unintentionally can run to one of these cities and be protected from the relatives of the one who was killed, for the relatives may seek to avenge the killing. upon reaching one of these cities, the one who caused the accidental death will appear before the leaders at the city gate and explain what happened. They must allow the accused to enter the city and live there among them. If the relatives of the victim come to avenge the killing, the leaders must not release the accused to them, for the death was accidental. But the person who caused the death must stay in that city and be tried by the community and found innocent. Then the one declared innocent because the death was accidental must continue to live in that city until the death of the high priest who was in office at the time of the accident. After that, the one found innocent is free to return home. Joshua 20:1-6, NLT.*
- B. The time period is roughly 1400 b.c. The place is ancient Israel. The Jews are finally in their Promised Land.
- C. Now there is one more item of business to care for. This was something taught in the law of Moses half a century earlier.
- D. Moses commanded God's people to assign certain cities to be Cities of Refuge. Today I want to explain what Cities of Refuge were, and then show you what they mean for our lives today.

IV. What were Cities of Refuge?

- A. *Justice System*
 1. Cities of refuge were part of the justice system in ancient Israel. There were six cities officially designated as Cities of Refuge. They were spread out. The idea was that no one in Israel would be more than a half-day's ride from a City of Refuge.
- B. *The Avenger of Blood.*
 1. Whenever somebody was killed--and it didn't matter if the killing was accidental or on purpose--the closest male relative of the victim became judge, jury, and executioner. He was called "the Avenger of Blood."
 2. The Avenger of Blood assembled a posse to hunt down and execute the guy who killed his relative. So when somebody gets killed, there's an Avenger of Blood.
 3. Now, when somebody gets killed *by accident* (manslaughter, accidental killing, etc), that's when the Cities of Refuge laws kick in. What laws?
- C. *Manslaughter (accidental, unintentional killing)*

1. Listen to the Law of Moses:
 - a) *If someone accidentally kills a neighbor without harboring any previous hatred, the slayer may flee to any of these cities and be safe. For example, suppose someone goes into the forest with a neighbor to cut wood. And suppose one of them swings an ax and the ax head flies off the handle, killing the other person. In such cases, the slayer could flee to one of the cities of refuge and be safe. If the distance to the nearest city of refuge was too far, an enraged avenger might be able to chase, down and kill the person who caused the death. The slayer would die, even though there was no death sentence and the first death had been an accident. Deuteronomy 19:4-6, NLT.*
 2. Notice the requirements: it has to be an unintentional killing. Accidental, and unpremeditated... only in these cases could a slayer take sanctuary in a City of Refuge.
 3. When a slayer arrived at a City of Refuge, the city leaders convened a quick trial.
 - a) They heard evidence from both the Avenger of Blood and the killer.
 - b) They determined whether the killing was homicide or manslaughter.
 - c) In the case of homicide, the murderer was turned over to the Avenger of Blood, and he was executed without pity (Deut 19:21).
 - d) But in the case of accidental killing, unintentional killing, the slayer would be granted sanctuary in the City of Refuge.
 - (1) There would be no other penalty than having to live in that city. This was the law of Moses, the law of God.
- V. So, here's how it goes.
- A. You and your neighbor go hunting. You trip over a branch, and your crossbow accidentally fires. Your arrow kills your neighbor who is your friend. You're heartbroken, and miserable, and freaked out.
 - B. You know exactly what you have to do.
 - C. You load your friend's body onto your horse and race for home. You tell your oldest son to return the body to your neighbor's family, and to explain what happened.
 1. "Take your time," you add.
 - D. Meanwhile, you kiss your spouse and kids goodbye, and tell them to meet you in the nearest City of Refuge. You quickly throw some things into a bag, and kick your horse into a full gallop.
 - E. Meanwhile, your neighbor's family has just heard the news. His brother is now officially the Avenger of Blood. He assembles a posse. They race to your house. You're already racing to the City of Refuge. They start chasing you.
 - F. Everything is hurried... you have to get to the city of Refuge before the Avenger of Blood gets to you.
 - G. Now, let me pause here to ask you a couple of questions:
 1. At the time when you are fleeing for dear life to the City of Refuge, what kind of roads would you like to be on? Little, rocky, windy roads, or wide, smooth, paved roads?
 2. And what if you weren't certain of the way... wouldn't you hope and pray that there would be clear markers pointing the way to the City of Refuge? Of course.
 - a) Let's see what the rabbis taught about the quality of the roads.
- VI. *The Quality of the Roads*
- A. Though this isn't in the Bible, this is what the Rabbis taught about roads leading to the Cities of Refuge... and I think they understood the heart of God and the Word of God on this.
 1. *Extremely wide.*
 - a) The Rabbis required this: "A private road is four cubits wide (six feet), a public road six cubits wide (nine feet), a road leading to a City of Refuge thirty-two cubits (forty-eight feet) wide" [Talmud, Tractate Baba Bathra 100a].
 - (1) That's about as wide as a regulation baseball court.
 - (2) The Rabbi's got it. They understood God's intention that every effort be made to enable the guilty party to obtain mercy in a City of Refuge. But there's more.
 2. *Clearly marked.*
 - a) Here's how another Rabbi described the road signs: "Every mile there was a tower. On each tower was a statue whose hands pointed the way to the Cities of Refuge." [Midrash Shochar Tov XXV].
 - b) There you are, frantically fleeing for refuge. Not only are the roads wide, but every mile you find a high tower upholding a statue, with the word REFUGE... and with its hands outstretched pointing the way.
 3. *Regularly maintained.*
 - a) "Jewish law (Halakah) determines that the courts in Israel must mark the roads leading to the Cities of Refuge, must keep them in good repair and make them wide, removing from them all obstacles and hindrance. The road must traverse neither hill nor valley nor river, but a bridge must be built so as not to delay the passage of the one fleeing there."
 - b) Every morning, the priests come out and maintain the roads.
 - (1) They remove rocks and sticks. They fill up potholes. They fix bridges. They sweep and rake and smooth the way. There is to be not one pebble of an obstacle between the slayer and the refuge.
 4. Finally you make it. With your horse all lathered up, you reach the gates of the City of Refuge. You are stopped by the city leaders. You are now under their protection.
 5. Fast on your heels rides up the Avenger of Blood with his posse. They want to kill you, and they just might have that right.
 - a) A court is convened. Evidence is heard. The facts are brought forth. You explain how you were best friends your neighbor; but you tripped and your bow accidentally fired. Sweat running down your face, panting with exhaustion, a decision is reached.
 - b) You are welcomed into the City of Refuge. And the Avenger of Blood is sent home, with condolences.
 - c) Under the law, you would have to stay in that city until till the current High Priest died. This could be pretty quick, if he was old... or it could be a lifetime.
 6. So now you know all about cities of refuge.

- B. But, I have to ask, so what? What could these hopelessly antiquated laws, from three and a half millennia ago, say to us today? Don't we have better things to worry about?
- C. You're worried about paying your bills, and the lockdown, and the smoke, and your job, and finishing school, and health, and your kids.
- D. We're all worried about our country, and Satanic deception, and the breakdown of respect for authority and truth.
 - 1. What is God teaching us today with these cities of refuge?
- E. Let me lay out four parallels between the Cities of Refuge and our lives today.

VII. Four Parallels

- A. *The slaying is parallel to our moral brokenness and guilt.*
 - 1. We all have struggles. We all have guilt. We all have dumb decisions we wish we could undo. We all have innocent mistakes that cost us big time. We have not-so-innocent choices that cost us big time.
 - a) Nobody here has an unblemished record.
 - 2. Nobody has perfectly kept the laws of God. We haven't lived up to God's standards. We haven't even lived up to our own standards. We are fallen members of a fallen race. We're all in trouble with God.
 - 3. So, let's put ourselves in the shoes of the slayer... and feel the fear and anxiety of the reality of being in trouble with God.
- B. *The Avenger of Blood is parallel to the Justice of God.*
 - 1. The Bible talks about the holiness of God, the justice of God, the righteousness of God, and the wrath of God.
 - 2. A lot of people struggle with these concepts, but we shouldn't.
 - a) How would you like to live in a universe where evil goes unpunished?
 - b) How would you like to live in a universe where the bad guys get away with it?
 - 3. The justice of God means we live in a universe that is good at its core, because its Maker is good, and doesn't wink at sin.
 - 4. If you're a victim of other people's sins, you love the idea of God's justice. But if other people are the victim of your sins, not so much, right?
 - 5. That's the tricky part, because no one is innocent in his sight. You can't want justice for other people, and then resent it for yourself.
 - 6. God is the Avenger of Blood. He's the ultimate avenger of blood. Sin gets punished. Evil gets hunted down in the end. That's the God we see in Scripture.
 - 7. I know that's bad news. But there is good news, too.
- C. *The Cities of Refuge parallel the Lord Jesus Christ.*
 - 1. In the City of Refuge, the slayer was stuck there until the High Priest died. The symbolism was that the death of the high priest counted as the death of the guilty party. It was a substitutionary death.
 - 2. In the same way, Jesus Christ was our High Priest. And he died so we can be free.
 - a) He stretched out his hands on an old rugged Cross.
 - b) He received into himself the sin of all the world, including yours.
 - c) He became your sin-bearer.
 - d) The Avenger of Blood accepted Christ's death instead of yours.
 - e) He shed his blood.
 - f) And before he died, he cried out IT IS FINISHED!
 - (1) Your guilt was finished. Your shame was finished. Your self-imposed alienation from God was finished.
 - g) On the Cross where Jesus died... whatever held you back from the life you were meant to live, was finished once for all.
 - 3. No matter how dark your sins, you have a city of refuge in the Lord Jesus Christ.
 - 4. Have you run to him? Have you fled to him for refuge? Jesus Christ is your great city of refuge, the only Savior from the divine avenger.
 - 5. That's our message, but it's really not my main point.
 - a) One more parallel...
- D. *The maintenance of the roads parallels our mission today.*
 - 1. As believers in Jesus, it is our mission to make the roads wide.
 - 2. It's our mission to keep the markers clear; to remove the obstacles; to open wide the highways to Jesus Christ.
 - 3. We exist to create unmistakable pointers, repeated pointers, ubiquitous pointers to refuge in Jesus Christ from the corruption and depravity in our world and in our hearts.
 - 4. The Cities of Refuge were priestly cities; and the church is a priestly tribe. We are priests.
 - 5. We remove the obstacles. We smooth the way.
 - a) Pathway Church exists so that the way is crystal clear, and the obstacles are swept away for all who need salvation in Christ.
 - b) This alone makes silences the deluded followers of that lying old serpent. The gospel has power.
 - 6. All summer long, we have been sweeping away obstacles.
 - a) We have consecrated our lives to God, and embraced our mission as royal priests... over 500 of us, saying Lord I'm yours.
 - b) We have prayed all summer long for 53,000 homes and over a hundred thousand people... Calling on God Almighty that the powers of darkness would be broken, and they would be saved.
 - c) We have served over 7,000 homes with love of Jesus.
 - d) We have gotten behind an epic ministry in Thailand, to liberate kids from sex-trafficking, and help them find the Savior. In 7 weeks, you have given over \$70,000.00.
 - 7. And I stand here today to tell that all was just the warm up for the main event.
- E. What is the main event?

VIII. The Main Event

- A. In 24 days from today, we are going to put on for our city, a major event.

1. *The Goal is salvations*, that thousands of people will hear the gospel, and hundreds will be saved. I'm still wrestling with God over the number of salvations to pray for. Part of me thinks 200, but another part of me can't shake 1,000, but that seems so out of reach. But then, again, all our summer goals seemed so out of reach. Pray for me.
 2. *The Emphasis is apologetics*. Apologetics is the art and science of showing how our faith makes sense. We are going to mash up apologetics with that same gospel that made the snake demons pass out.
 3. *Our Program will be 8 meetings*, starting October 7, 24 days. Wednesday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday, Wednesday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday.
 4. *Our Style will be something like TED talks...* Instead of one long talk, there's been several short talks. Each talk no longer than 18 minutes. Each event even will have short talks from guest speakers and from me...
 - a) Justin Brierley will speak on...
 - (1) Why God makes sense of existence
 - (2) Why God makes sense of you
 - (3) Why you can take the resurrection seriously
 - (4) Why, after 15 years of talking with atheists, I'm still a Christian.
 - b) Jon McCray will speak on
 - (1) Christian Faith and False Expectations
 - (2) Is There Really Only One True Religion?
 - (3) Can People Build Their Own Religion?
 - (4) What I've learned from Talking Regularly with Atheists
 - c) My topics will be
 - (1) Christianity's Unbeatable Logic
 - (2) Christianity's Undeniable Person
 - (3) Evolution's Unanswerable Objection
 - (4) Plus... wrap-ups
 - (5) There will be testimonies from Brad Fulton and Fei Xei.
 - (6) There will be apologetics short videos
 - d) We've had our students submit questions that keep them from Christ...
 - (1) How do you know God is real?
 - (2) Why do bad things happen?
 - (3) Why did God allow sin into the world?
 - e) There will be music and fun stuff too, like a tailgate party and food trucks.
 - (a) All of this in 8 sessions, over 2 weeks in October.
 - i) *Because the gospel of grace, the message of Christ crucified and risen again, is the only power to stop the devil from running rampant, and to make the serpent-worshippers just shut up.*
- B. Our God is a Trinity — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We are going to symbolize the Trinity with an equilateral triangle... here's a shout out to our math teachers.
1. How many degrees in each angle? SIXTY DEGREES.
 2. So, ladies and gentlemen, today I introduce to you *SIXTY DEGREES — TED-Talk Style Conversations on Logic, Faith, and Life*
 - a) We are clearing the way to refuge...
 - b) We want people who are on the wrong side of divine justice to find the same refuge we found when we found Christ.

IX. But wait there's more...

- A. We have all these government restrictions and all that. How are we going to fit everybody?
- B. Plus, you might say that your unsaved friends won't darken the door of a church.
- C. We are able to move our services OUTSIDE where we have no governmental limitations. We'll still sit inside as many as we can, but with the outside seating plus inside seating, we can fit almost thousand people.
- D. To make that happen, lord willing, we are going to pick up a giant, Jumbotron TV, giving us a new tool for years to come to present the one message that stops the devil in his tracks. We have been saving up for such a time as this... for the last couple of years, we have tightened our belts. We have saved up funds for this, and please pray it's delivered on time the first day of October.

X. Conclusion

- A. Ancient Israel kept two priests patrolling the roads to Cities of Refuge, at all times. When a slayer came running, the priests would intercept the Avenger of Blood.
- B. They'd stop him, and plead with him for the life of the slayer. Their job was to appeal for mercy, and gain time for the slayer to reach his refuge.
 1. And our job is to do the same.
 2. To stop God in his tracks, and to pray for his mercy... This is actually God's idea! He wants us to interrupt him with prayer and preaching, so that our friends might reach *God's refuge* before *God's vengeance* catches up.
- C. Let's preach the gospel. There's power in the gospel. Amen?