

Immerse Day 65 :: City of Refuge

“You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, ‘Raca’ is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell.” – Matt. 5:21-22

Murder was a really big deal in the Old Testament. Not that it isn't now, but most of today's reading is about how to deal with murder. It's pretty easy. If you murder someone, you die. Plain and simple. No waffling, no buying your way out of it. Murder = death. Except...

What if you murder someone accidentally? We would say it wasn't murder; it was manslaughter and therefore less punishable. But the bible was written not only to a different time than ours, it was written to a different culture than ours. One of our biggest difficulties with the bible comes when we forget this. In biblical times and biblical places, murder was murder, and the family of the murdered had not only a right but a duty to avenge their fallen brother or sister. So what if it was an accident? What if you were cutting down a tree and your axe head slipped off its shaft and struck someone, killing them? “Oops” doesn't cut it.

So that's where the Cities of Refuge come in. There are 6, three to the east of the Jordan River and three to the west. If you accidentally kill someone, you won't be able to talk your way out of it, so your only choice is to run. You run to the nearest City of Refuge. There you will be protected (presumably by both God and the city's inhabitants) from the Avenger. However, now you have to live in that city “until the High Priest dies”. This could be the rest of your life, or it could be a year. But nobody was allowed to seek vengeance in a City of Refuge. Grace and protection even at the end of Numbers.

As someone pointed out to me recently, the more we read the Pentateuch (the first 5 books of the bible), the more we understand just how incomprehensible Jesus was to His community. Murder was a really big deal, and now Jesus tells them not only murder but hatred, and mockery, and slander matter deeply to God. In fact, the later is a more vile sin than murder, based on punishment. If murder = death, then slander = hell. Yikes.

Maybe it's time to stop looking at the individual commands of scripture and start looking at the whole. All of the commands, both Old Testament and New, are to make us more holy, more like Jesus. Jesus doesn't murder, or slander, or hate. Jesus looks at people and sees their flaws with compassion. And He calls those flaws out in us, whether it is an injustice or an attitude of hatred. God wants us to be like Him, to be perfect. And to show a God-sized compassion for those who aren't. Then we don't need Cities of Refuge anymore.