

Numbers 35

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Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 00] What do you make of Julian Assange? He has been one of the big news items in this past week.

Of course, the story has been bubbling in the background for long enough, particularly these last couple of months. But the spark that lit the diplomatic fuse was the reference made in a letter from the Foreign Office to the Ecuadorian authorities of the purported legal right of the UK to storm the embassy or enter into the embassy and arrest Assange.

Now, our Ecuadorian friends, I have to say not surprisingly, perceived this as a threat, while our own foreign minister, William Hague, continues to protest that the letter was simply providing all the relevant information pertinent to the case. I don't know what you make of this particular development in this story, but it seems to me that the letter was at best ill-advised, or in any case the manner in which it was drafted. Now, the legal aspect of the case, in as much as I understand it, concerns the extent to which an embassy can serve as a place of asylum or refuge. And if so, do the circumstances of this particular case merit refuge being granted?

There are two questions there, and both would need to be answered, I guess, in the affirmative, in this regard or in this particular case. Well, I'll, for the moment, keep my counsel on what I think about the case of Julian Assange. But what I will say is that the case brings to our attention an interest in exploring the origins of the very concept of a place of refuge, a place of refuge or asylum for those who claim innocence in the face of accusation. Namely, when we think of the origins of that very concept, namely the cities of refuge in ancient Israel. This is something we're told that was peculiar to ancient Israel, and so we can legitimately draw a direct line back to these cities of refuge as giving the origin of refuge as giving the origin to this very concept that is a topical matter today and in these past few days. And I want to spend a little time considering what would seldom be but has become a topical matter. Now, we've already read one of the passages that gives details concerning this law and what the law involves and the manner in which it's to be implemented.

We're going to come to that in a moment, but before we do that, we do need to briefly, I hope, begin by locating the law, this particular law concerning the cities of refuge in its original Old Testament context, and so establish what, if any, applicability or relevance the law has today.

[3 : 36] So, we need to think about where it fits in to this body of law given by God to the people of Israel Israel through Moses, where it fits in, and having established that, we can then determine or come to a view if this law is applicable, or even if we come to the view that it's not applicable, whether there is some abiding relevance in the law or in the principles that the law reveals. So, to do that as our starting point, the law of Moses, or more accurately, God's law delivered through Moses has been, and this is something that's been commented on before, has been helpfully divided in three parts.

We can identify within that body of law what we ordinarily call ceremonial law, what we will call, or is often called civil law, and then also what is ordinarily spoken of as moral law. Now, the ceremonial law concerns all the many and varied regulations surrounding the sacrificial system and temple worship. Those matters established by God for, among other purposes, the very important one, of providing a means of atonement for sin. So, that whole part of the law that is generally termed ceremonial. Then there's the civil law, and that is that part of the law provided by God for Israel as a nation state, if that term applies. It could be argued that that's a more modern term, but I think we know what we mean by that. I think in the Westminster Confession of Faith, it speaks of the law for

Israel as a body politic, the civil law. And then, of course, we have the moral law, summarized in the Ten Commandments. We do have to be careful with these divisions, helpful though they are. In particular, I would say that it's important to stress that all of God's law, including the ceremonial and the civil, is moral in character. The fact that there is one part of it that ordinarily enjoys that designation of moral law is not to be misunderstood, as to suggest that the other parts are not moral in character. They are moral. Anything that God is the author of, necessarily, will enjoy that characteristic. So, while we're conscious of having to be careful with these distinctions, we still conclude that they are helpful, and particularly so when we consider the matter of their continuing application. We want to get to this because that will then lead us in to think about the law concerning cities of refuge, and to consider how it may have a continuing applicability or relevance. These distinctions, then, do help us in this regard. And the crucial element, of course, as we consider the abiding applicability of law or of some of these laws or these different types of laws, is the coming of Christ. The coming of Christ very dramatically changes things. With the coming of Christ and with

His sacrificial death, the ceremonial law is fulfilled and so abolished. The important thing that happens is that it's fulfilled. As a result, it is abolished, but the fundamental development with the coming of Christ is the fulfillment of the ceremonial law. But also with the coming of Christ, we have a new situation with regard to who are God's people. In the Old Testament, God's people were identified with a particular nation-state or body politic, the nation of Israel. And that nation required a civil code, required civil laws, like any nation does. God provided those for Israel, and so they were applicable for Israel. But the people of God are no longer made up of those who belong to one nation-state. The people of God are made up of citizens of the many peoples and nations of the world. And so this civil law is no longer applicable to the people of God in the way that it was in the Old Testament. Now, of course, as citizens of a nation, we are subject to the civil laws of whatever nation is that we are citizens of. And of course, we quite rightly and legitimately would look and hope that our legislators would legislate in a manner that is in accordance with God's law and the principles even of God's civil law that He gave to Israel. But as a body of law, it is no longer applicable for God's people, the civil law as it was for Israel. But the moral law that we've indicated is summarized in the Ten

Commandments. We contend and believe in joy's continuing and universal applicability. Now, we're going to move on now to the matter of the cities of refuge, but it is worth noting in this just very brief discussion of these different categories of law in the Old Testament, it's worth noting that a grasp of these distinctions is important and useful in responding to those who accuse Christians, who accuse us, of picking and choosing from the Bible. I'm sure you're very familiar with that. It's very common in the current debate concerning same-sex marriage. And people will say, oh, you Christians, you pick and choose the laws that you fancy, that you are comfortable with. And so, you ignore all kinds of laws in the Old Testament that you don't think are very suitable or not very convenient, but you hold on to others. And so, you just pick and choose. Well, that's the accusation.

[9 : 49] But of course, it's an accusation that doesn't hold water if we have a clear grasp of these distinctions, and if we have a clear grasp that there are indeed laws that do not have and were not intended to have a continuing applicability. And so, yes, we do leave them to one side. We would be remiss if we did not do so. And so, while I'm not saying this is a simple matter, it is important for us in defending the faith and in responding to those who would mock or accuse, be it with ill intent or sometimes perhaps with genuine confusion or misunderstanding, to be able to respond to them.

But that we must leave to one side for the moment. Now, the laws concerning the cities of refuge come under the category of civil law, though you could argue that some aspects do have a ceremonial flavor to them, but we won't go into those details. Given what we've said, this law concerning cities of refuge no longer applies to one particular nation, no longer applies to the people of God as they formed the nation of Israel in the Old Testament. However, to recognize that the law is no longer applicable is not to say that it is no longer relevant or that we can learn nothing from it.

So, the question that I would pose now is, in what ways is the civil law of God provided for Israel relevant or helpful today? And that includes the regulations concerning the cities of refuge.

Well, I think it's relevant and helpful in two ways. First of all, these civil laws provide general principles that can and should be applied as legislators seek to make laws, and as citizens we seek to participate in the nations and societies where God has placed us. We need to come to conclusions on different matters. Well, the principles that we find in the civil law of Israel can be and are helpful for us in that process and in that responsibility that we have. For example, in the matter of designing a judicial system, there are principles embedded in the civil law of Israel that are relevant and helpful. Indeed, much of our own judicial system finds its roots in the civil law of Israel. So, it's helpful in that regard.

But it's helpful in a second way. It's helpful in that the civil law, together with all of God's law, reveals to us something of what God is like. Now, that should not surprise us. The law is God's law, and if it is God's law, then it will necessarily reflect His character in one measure or another.

[12 : 44] And in the study of God's law, we can learn something about God and what He is like. His law reveals what is important to Him. His law reveals those matters that He is concerned about. Just to highlight or to emphasize this point concerning the matter of God's authorship of the law, it's interesting to note the language that we find in Exodus, where this same matter of the city of refuge is dealt with. If you just turn quickly with me to Exodus chapter 20, and we know Exodus chapter 20 is the chapter where we have the Ten Commandments. The only reference I want to make to Exodus 20 is how it begins, because then that's relevant to what we're going to notice in the following chapter. Exodus chapter 20 begins, and God spoke all these words.

So God is speaking. God is speaking to the people through Moses. We have the Ten Commandments, and then in chapter 21, in verse 12, we have this first reference to the principle, if you wish, of a place of refuge.

And notice how God expresses Himself in this regard. He says, Anyone who strikes a man and kills him shall surely be put to death. However, if he does not do it intentionally, but God lets it happen, he is to flee to a place I will designate.

But if a man schemes and kills another man deliberately, take him away from my altar and put him to death. Now, we'll come back to these verses in a moment. For the moment, my only concern is to notice how interesting it is that it is so clear that God attributes to Himself personal and direct authorship of this law and indeed of the application of it. He speaks even of being the one who will designate. I will designate the cities. Not even that he says, well, there should be cities, and well, you guys work it out. No, I will designate those places that will serve as cities of refuge. Now, greater detail on this we then have in Numbers and in Deuteronomy. So God is the author of this law. Very clearly, very explicitly, He identifies Himself as the author of this law.

Therefore, we can surely learn things about God, truths about God, from considering this law. So two possible uses of the civil law, even though it is no longer directly applicable. One, the general principles that we can draw from it, and secondly, what it can reveal to us about God and what God is like. And it's that second use that I want to focus on as we continue. Now, we will notice in the passing some general principles that derive from this law, but the primary concern is what this law tells us, reveals to us, concerning God and what God is like. Now, just to remind ourselves of the law, well, we read the description of it in Numbers, chapter 35, so I don't want to spend time simply repeating what we've read. But just very, very briefly, the law concerned the matter of unintentional killing, what we would call manslaughter. So, a situation where somebody without intent accidentally kills another, accidentally kills another. Now, it was the case that if somebody died a violent death, the law established that a member of the victim's family, named as the avenger of blood, had the responsibility of seeking justice for the one who had died.

[16 : 26] And, of course, the situation that is being contemplated here is, well, what happens when the death is accidental? And you have a situation where the avenger of blood is intent on killing the one responsible for the death of his relative, and that would be unjust. There was no intention to kill. It was an accident. What is to be done? And what God establishes is that these cities of refuge would provide a place of asylum, a place of protection for the one who is escaping from the avenger of blood. If it was unclear as to whether he was or was not guilty, it would also provide respite, breathing space for due process to be gone through regarding the evidence and witnesses and so forth before establishing if he was or was not guilty. One of the requirements was that the one who was seeking protection in the cities of refuge would remain there until, curiously and intriguingly, until the death of the high priest. Those who were fortunate might arrive at the city of refuge a few weeks or months before the high priest dies, but you can imagine the situation of some unfortunate, innocent man who has to spend years waiting for the high priest to pass away. But we'll leave that to one side. That's roughly what the law is about. What can we learn about God from His law concerning cities of refuge? And there's three things I want us to draw from. There's three big truths concerning God. I'll say what they are, and then we'll think of them each in turn briefly. First of all, that God loves life.

God loves life. Secondly, we'll notice that God loves justice. And then finally, that God loves to save. First of all, then, God loves life. Now, underpinning this law concerning the cities of refuge is this fundamental truth that God loves life. And here I am not referring, in the first instance, to God's concern to protect the life of the one guilty of manslaughter, but rather His concern that innocent blood shed in Israel be avenged. Now, it's true that as God would seek to protect the man or woman who accidentally had killed somebody, He shows evidence of His love for life. But of greater importance in revealing how much God loves life is what underpins the need for the city of refuge is what underpins the need for the city of refuge, that there was within the system established by God, this avenger of blood who would seek to kill those who were guilty of murder, of intentional killing. See, this is why the cities of refuge were needed. God had established that in the event of a murder, a near relative termed the avenger of blood would be responsible for exacting punishment on the perpetrator. Now, it's very interesting that it's the same relative as the one designated in other contexts as the kinsman redeemer. We remember from the book of Ruth how there was this relative known as the kinsman redeemer. Well, it would have been the very same relative. Indeed, the word that is used to translate or translated as avenger and translated as redeemer is the same word. The point is this, that the primary concern in there being this avenger of blood was not the punishment of the offender, though clearly that was part of it. The offender needed to be punished. That was just. But that wasn't the primary purpose. The primary purpose was that atonement be made for the blood that had been shed. Notice what we read at the very end of Numbers chapter 35. In concluding this whole matter concerning the cities of refuge, God says, do not pollute the land where you are.

Bloodshed pollutes the land, and atonement cannot be made for the land on which blood has been shed except by the blood of the one who shed it. What God is saying is that life is so precious to Him that the shedding of innocent blood not only brings tragedy and disgrace to those immediately affected. Tragedy for the victim and his family, disgrace for the perpetrator and his family. But that's not the only consequence of murder. What God is saying is that the shedding of innocent blood pollutes the whole land. There's a very real sense in which innocent blood being shed has this huge negative impact on the whole land. Hence the need for what is described as atonement or redemption. And so what we find, what we discover, is that God so loves life that the shedding of innocent blood is such a grave and serious matter that it requires such a grave and serious response.

Now, in that context, it's ironic that some protest on the basis of the punishments of the Mosaic civil code that for God life is cheap. They say, oh, for God life is cheap. He's forever killing people and executing people and the Old Testament. The Old Testament is full of God killing people and massacring people.

Well, that caricature, that blasphemous caricature could be nothing further from the truth. What we find revealed not only here, but we certainly find revealed here, is the great esteem in which God holds life. God loves life. Hence this very grave and solemn response that He has established in the event of innocent blood being shed. Cities of refuge were necessary because of the danger that the avenger of blood might go beyond his duty, which was to seek atonement for the land, and rather seek base revenge for the death of a loved one. Now, the name of this individual, the Avenger of Blood, isn't very helpful because, you know, when we hear that name, the Avenger of Blood, it sounds like some Arnold Schwarzenegger film, or, you know, that's some vigilante, some Old Testament vigilante, but that's by no means what is being presented to us. It wasn't the purpose of this man to seek revenge. It was the purpose of this man to atone for the wrong that had been done, the blood that had been shed, and he did that by means of executing the one guilty of murder. But of course, men being men and humans being humans, there is that desire for revenge. And even in the case when the death was an accidental one, and the city of refuge was intended and served to protect those who could have been victims of this Avenger of Blood going beyond what was his his purpose and his role within the system that God had established. So, God loves life, and God does not change. God loves life today. Today, he hears the cry of those whose blood has been shed by violent men and, we have to say, tolerated by indifferent societies. And he hears that voice as clearly today as he heard the cry of Abel's blood. Remember the very vivid language that speaks of God hearing the cry of Abel's blood. In Genesis 4 and verse 10, your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground.

[24 : 32] And God heard that cry, and he continues to hear the cry of innocent blood shed. He hears the cry of the blood of countless infants killed in their mother's womb in our civilized so-called society. Of course, we are told insistently, I've had my MP tell me on more than one occasion that she stands for a woman's right to choose. But what of a child's right to live? And in the light of what we are considering this evening, what of our land polluted by such violence? God have mercy upon us. God loves life, and we are to be like God. We too are to love life. We too are to seek the protection for those who are threatened by violent death, and very especially those who are powerless. But how often are we rather like Saul of Tarsus looking on with guilty complicity as Stephen was stoned? So, God loves life. But a second truth that we can draw from God's law concerning cities of refuge is that God loves justice. Now, this is perhaps the most obvious and most explicit truth concerning God, given that this is legislation that seeks to ensure that justice is done. God is a God of justice, and such is His concern that He not only provides legislation that ensures that the guilty are punished, but also that the innocent are protected.

In this case, those guilty, as we have already seen, of unintentional killing. But the account also illustrates God's concern for justice in other ways. Or put another way, the account or the legislation concerning cities of refuge reveals certain aspects or principles of justice that are important to God. And we'll just notice two or three of them. One principle that comes out very clearly in this legislation is that justice should focus on motive. This is the clear distinction that is being drawn. You have to establish the motive. Was it with malice a forethought, or was it unintentional? You know, was it deliberate or was it accidental? The actual outcome is the same.

Somebody is killed, tragically. But what determines the guilt is the motivation of the heart. And this is fundamental to God's conception of justice. And that should be important for us too. It should be reflected in our own judicial systems that motivation and intent are fundamental to establishing guilt or innocence. If I could just give a very trivial example of where that seemed to have been lost sight of.

And it's so trivial that I'm almost holding back from giving it, but I've begun now, so I'll continue. Remember the case of the fellow who tweeted his intention to blow up Robin Hood Airport near Nottingham.

I don't know what the problem was. I think it was during the winter and their flights were being canceled. And in a moment of frustration, he tweeted, I'm going to blow up the airport. And then he got arrested and oh, a big hoo-ha. He was eventually on appeal. The charges were dropped.

[28 : 04] But there is very clear where it was necessary to establish the man's intention. Now, was it foolish of him to say that? Well, of course it was foolish of him to say that. But clearly, any right-minded person could have established that it wasn't his intention to issue a threat, a genuine threat to blow up an airport. Intention is very important in establishing a man or woman's guilt or innocence.

Certainly, God considers it important. Now, that shouldn't surprise us because constantly in the Bible we read of the importance of the heart. We're constantly being told that what God is interested in is in our heart, in our motivations, in our intentions. That's the heart of the matter, if we can use the word again. But another principle that is important to God in the matter of justice and the administration of justice is that justice should be accessible. That's something we also find in this law concerning the cities of refuge. That doesn't come out so clearly in the passage in Numbers, but if we quickly notice how the same legislation is presented to us in Deuteronomy chapter 19 and verses 2 and 3. It's just a detail, and we won't dwell on it, but I just want to draw it out.

Then in chapter 19 of Deuteronomy concerning the cities of refuge, God establishes, then set aside for yourselves three cities centrally located in the land the Lord your God is giving you to possess. Build roads to them and divide into three parts the land the Lord your God is giving to you as an inheritance so that anyone who kills a man may flee there. And if you know the geography, or if you find somebody who does know the geography and has already done the work for you, you will establish that the names of the towns or the towns that were selected by God to serve a city of refuge to the east of the Jordan and to the west of the Jordan, three on each side, they are geographically located on either side in the north, in the center, and in the south. And what was the purpose? Well, it's obvious what the purpose was, is that justice would be accessible to all. Indeed, it's interesting, it's fascinating that even there is this indication that roads should be maintained in such a way that would allow the one who was being chased to get to the cities of refuge.

Justice should be accessible. Now, that is of huge importance and application. How often is it the case? And not just in what we would deem to be uncivilized or primitive societies or tin pot dictatorships and all the prejudices that we often have in these regards. But how often is it not the case even in our own land that justice is accessible for the rich and the well-connected, while the poor and the marginalized are often excluded? Well, for God that is not acceptable. God, in presenting and in providing this legislation concerning cities of refuge, makes very clear his own concern that justice should be accessible. And a related point that we can draw from this legislation is that justice should be, we can describe it in this way and then explain, justice should be blind. Or in other words, justice should be for all regardless of who they are. That did come out clearly in the passage in Numbers.

In chapter 35 and in verse 15, when God is explaining who could make use of these cities of refuge, we're told very clearly that Israelites, aliens, foreigners, and any other people. Israelites, aliens, and any other people. This wasn't something for the privileged few or for the Israelites.

[31 : 58] Anybody who found themselves in this predicament of having killed somebody accidentally and whose life was in danger from the avenger of blood, anybody could flee to the cities of refuge and be given asylum or refuge or protection. Why? Because justice, in God's conception of it, is blind. It should be regardless of who it is that is in front of you. We know the Old Bailey in London and you have on the top of the Old Bailey, a statue of Lady Justice, and she's blindfolded. And what does that illustrate?

What is the purpose of that blindfold? Well, the purpose of it, or what it is seeking to represent, is that justice is blind. Justice doesn't look and say, oh, I've got somebody very important in front of me or somebody very wealthy in front of me, and so my judgment will be determined by that. Or the one in front of me is powerless and unimportant and of no value, and so my judgment will be reflected by that.

No, justice. God's conception of justice is that it should be blind. It should be for all. God loves justice. We too should share God's love for justice. But we finish by noticing this, that God loves to save. His provision of cities of refuge speaks eloquently of His nature as a God of refuge, a God who protects and saves. It's not surprising that much is made of how the cities of refuge can point towards the ultimate refuge to be found in Christ. Now, is there a deliberate intention for the cities of refuge to be understood as types or shadows of Christ? My own opinion is that I suspect not.

But I think there is one intriguing detail in the legislation that is, if I can use this word, shadowy. And it is the reference in the legislation that the one who was enjoying protection in the city of refuge, nonetheless, had to remain there in a sense, a prisoner there, protected, but a prisoner in one sense.

He had to remain there until the death of the high priest, which secured his total liberty. At that point, he could return home. And I'm not going to go into that or seek to develop that, but there does seem to be an intriguing possible shadow there as we look forward to Christ. Of course, if we are to compare and contrast the cities of refuge with Jesus as our refuge, what is most striking are not the similarities but the one crucial difference. The cities of refuge were for the innocent, while Jesus is a refuge for the guilty. It's a fundamental difference. God's desire to save or provide refuge finds its most powerful expression not in the cities of refuge, though it finds some expression in them, but it finds the most powerful expression in the person of Jesus, to whom the guilty can flee for protection.

[35 : 08] There is suggestive language in the book of Hebrews concerning Jesus that perhaps alludes to this Old Testament provision. In Hebrews 6 and verse 18, believers are described in the following way, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us.

The reason I think that's interesting and possibly alludes to the cities of refuge is that in the original announcement by God concerning the cities of refuge that we read there in Exodus chapter 121, there seems to be reference to an arrangement in place prior to the actual establishment of the cities.

You see, when God first gives the legislation, the cities hadn't been established yet. The law was given, but you still had to decide where they were going to be, and you had to build them up, and you know, there was still time that would pass before they were available.

And yet it's interesting to say, or to note, that in Exodus, there's clear reference to the principle or the concept of refuge being already current. And if just very quickly we notice that, that, and then see how that can bring us back to the reference in Hebrews in Exodus chapter 21 and verse 14.

You know, in verse 13 God speaks of how He will designate these cities at some future point. But then in verse 14 He says, but if a man schemes and kills another man deliberately, take him away from my altar and put him to death. And the implication is that this man was seeking protection or refuge at God's altar. And some suggest that the altar that had horns at each corner, the one who was seeking that protection would grab hold of the horns. And there's an interesting reference in Kings to one man doing just that, grabbing hold of the horns of the altar, seeking protection. And what God is saying, but if he's guilty, then you just take him away from the altar and kill him. But the principle that somebody would seek refuge at the altar seemed to be one that was already present even before it was legislated for in the shape of cities of refuge. And when we have that in mind, in the background as it were, perhaps this language of Hebrews is given some, at least the possibility that it alludes back to that. Those who have fled for refuge are to hold fast to the hope set before us. And this language, as I say of Hebrew, of fleeing for refuge, of holding fast to our hope, would seem to echo this Old Testament practice related to the law concerning cities of refuge. Well, I simply float the possibility for you to consider. The important matter, and with this we finish, the important matter is to remember the key truth. God loves to save. God loves life,

[38 : 07] God loves justice, and God loves to save. And his love to save finds partial expression in his providing cities of refuge for the innocent, but finds fulsome and surprising expression in the sending of Jesus as a refuge for the guilty. And the question for us is, is he our refuge? We are guilty. Is Jesus the one who has provided as refuge for the guilty? Is he your refuge? Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we come to you.