NUMBERS

Chapter 35

*Towns for the Levites*

**On the plains of Moab by the Jordan across from Jericho, the Lord said to Moses, 2 “Command the Israelites to give the Levites towns to live in from the inheritance the Israelites will possess. And give them pasturelands around the towns. 3 Then they will have towns to live in and pasturelands for their cattle, flocks and all their other livestock. 4 “The pasturelands around the towns that you give the Levites will extend out fifteen hundred feet from the town wall. 5 Outside the town, measure three thousand feet on the east side, three thousand on the south side, three thousand on the west and three thousand on the north, with the town in the center. They will have this area as pastureland for the towns.**

**35:1–5** Since the Levites would not receive an allotment with the other tribes in the land (1:47–53), they would need towns in which to live and to raise their families and care for their livestock. The Levites were to be spread throughout the land, not in an isolated encampment. Jos 21 presents the fulfillment of this command. (CSB)

**35:3** *pasturelands*. The offerings at the tabernacle alone would not feed and sustain the Levites and their families; they needed homes and pastures nearby. they needed homes and pastures nearby. (TLSB)

*Cities of Refuge*

**6 “Six of the towns you give the Levites will be cities of refuge, to which a person who has killed someone may flee. In addition, give them forty-two other towns. 7 In all you must give the Levites forty-eight towns, together with their pasturelands. 8 The towns you give the Levites from the land the Israelites possess are to be given in proportion to the inheritance of each tribe: Take many towns from a tribe that has many, but few from one that has few.” 9 Then the Lord said to Moses: 10 “Speak to the Israelites and say to them: ‘When you cross the Jordan into Canaan, 11 select some towns to be your cities of refuge, to which a person who has killed someone accidentally may flee. 12 They will be places of refuge from the avenger, so that a person accused of murder may not die before he stands trial before the assembly. 13 These six towns you give will be your cities of refuge. 14 Give three on this side of the Jordan and three in Canaan as cities of refuge. 15 These six towns will be a place of refuge for Israelites, aliens and any other people living among them, so that anyone who has killed another accidentally can flee there. 16 “ ‘If a man strikes someone with an iron object so that he dies, he is a murderer; the murderer shall be put to death. 17 Or if anyone has a stone in his hand that could kill, and he strikes someone so that he dies, he is a murderer; the murderer shall be put to death. 18 Or if anyone has a wooden object in his hand that could kill, and he hits someone so that he dies, he is a murderer; the murderer shall be put to death. 19 The avenger of blood shall put the murderer to death; when he meets him, he shall put him to death. 20 If anyone with malice aforethought shoves another or throws something at him intentionally so that he dies 21 or if in hostility he hits him with his fist so that he dies, that person shall be put to death; he is a murderer. The avenger of blood shall put the murderer to death when he meets him. 22 “ ‘But if without hostility someone suddenly shoves another or throws something at him unintentionally 23 or, without seeing him, drops a stone on him that could kill him, and he dies, then since he was not his enemy and he did not intend to harm him, 24 the assembly must judge between him and the avenger of blood according to these regulations. 25 The assembly must protect the one accused of murder from the avenger of blood and send him back to the city of refuge to which he fled. He must stay there until the death of the high priest, who was anointed with the holy oil. 26 “ ‘But if the accused ever goes outside the limits of the city of refuge to which he has fled 27 and the avenger of blood finds him outside the city, the avenger of blood may kill the accused without being guilty of murder. 28 The accused must stay in his city of refuge until the death of the high priest; only after the death of the high priest may he return to his own property. 29 “ ‘These are to be legal requirements for you throughout the generations to come, wherever you live. 30 “ ‘Anyone who kills a person is to be put to death as a murderer only on the testimony of witnesses. But no one is to be put to death on the testimony of only one witness. 31 “ ‘Do not accept a ransom for the life of a murderer, who deserves to die. He must surely be put to death. 32 “ ‘Do not accept a ransom for anyone who has fled to a city of refuge and so allow him to go back and live on his own land before the death of the high priest. 33 “ ‘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. 34 Do not defile the land where you live and where I dwell, for I, the Lord, dwell among the Israelites.’ ”**

**35:6–15** Six Levitical cities were to be stationed strategically in the land—three in Transjordan and three in Canaan proper—as cities of refuge, where a person guilty of unintentional manslaughter might escape blood revenge. Jos 20 describes the sites that were chosen. (CSB)

**35:6–7** *six cities of refuge*. Cf Jsh 20. (TLSB)

*forty-two cities*. Levites were not to have their inheritance in one compact area (cf 18:20–24). Because they were to represent all of Israel by their service in the tabernacle (18:1–7), each tribe, “in proportion to” (35:8) its size, was to contribute cities and their surrounding grazing grounds in order to provide the Levites with dwelling places and a means of sustenance (Jsh 21). The 6 cities of refuge added to the 42 Levitical holdings equal 48 localities surrendered by all tribes. (TLSB)

**35:1–8** God had selected the Levites to help the priests. Their cities of refuge would protect individuals accused of accidental killing. The Lord leaves nothing to chance or accident but thoroughly prepares for His people’s bodily needs, peace, and blessing. Today, entrust your life and ways to Him, for He cares for you! • “O God of mercy, God of might, In love and pity infinite, Teach us, as ever in Thy sight, To live our lives in Thee.” Amen. (*LSB* 852:1) (TLSB)

**35:11** *select cities*. Advance instructions for the allotment of Israel’s inheritance included the directive to set aside six cities to serve the common good in the maintenance of social order. (TLSB)

*manslayer*. One who unintentionally or without malicious forethought had caused the death of another could find safety from the avenger in one of the six cities of refuge. (TLSB)

**35:12** *avenger*. According to ancient custom, a slain person’s nearest of kin had the right to act as “the avenger of blood.” It devolved upon him to take the life of the murderer of his relative (vv 25, 27; cf Gn 4:9). This means of safeguarding the sanctity of life and of administering justice was to be severely restricted. The old system could have resulted in endless feuds. (TLSB)

**35:14** *three cities beyond the Jordan*. Named by Moses (Dt 4:43). (TLSB)

*three cities in the land of Canaan*. Appointed by Joshua (Jsh 20:7). (TLSB)

**35:16–34** Elders of each city would sort through such matters. (TLSB)

**35:16–21** Various descriptions of the taking of life are presented that would indicate willful murder. (CSB)

**35:16** *murderer shall be put to death*. The institution of cities of refuge was not to abrogate the law that “whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed” (Gn 9:6). But capital punishment could be inflicted on an accused murderer only “on the evidence of witnesses” to the crime (v 30; cf Dt 19:15). (TLSB)

**35:22–23** God’s Law is esp focused on the issue of motive. (TLSB)

**35:22** *without hostility.* The cities of refuge were to be established for the person who had committed an act of involuntary manslaughter. (CSB)

**35:24** *according to these regulations.* Any gracious provision is subject to abuse. For this reason the case of the involuntary slayer had to be determined by the judges. Further, the accused man had to stay in the city of refuge until the death of the high priest (when there would be a general amnesty). If the accused left the city of refuge, he would become fair game again for the avenger of blood. (CSB)

**35:25–28** See note on Jos 20:6. (CSB)

**35:25** *rescue*. Provide refuge. (TLSB)

*until the death of the high priest*. The life of the high priest served as an atonement in such cases. (TLSB)

**35:30** *witnesses.* To avoid the possibility of an innocent party being accused and sentenced to death on insufficient evidence. (CSB)

**35:31** *no ransom*. Unpardonable. (TLSB)

**35:32** Not even an involuntary slayer could leave the city of refuge on the payment of a ransom. (CSB)

**35:33** *Bloodshed pollutes the land.* The crime of murder is not only an offense against the sanctity of life; it is in fact a pollutant to the Lord’s sacred land. (CSB)

**35:9–34** Individuals accused of an accidental killing find safety from “the avenger of blood” in cities of refuge. These cities could not harbor intentional murders (cf Ex 20:13). To protect the innocent, God establishes a system of justice with two witnesses (v 30). Today, pray for the families of victims and for the guilty. Pray also for wise lawmakers, judges, and juries. Our God is a judge who has pronounced just punishment. In Christ, He also pronounces grace and mercy, which are blessings for believers, who in turn benefit their communities. • “ ‘You shall not murder, hurt, nor hate; Your anger dare not dominate. Be kind and patient; help, defend, And treat your foe as your friend.’ Have mercy, Lord!” Amen. (*LSB* 581:6) (TLSB)