

NUMBERS

Chapter 35

Cities for the Levites

The LORD spoke to Moses in the plains of Moab by the Jordan at Jericho, saying, 2 “Command the people of Israel to give to the Levites some of the inheritance of their possession as cities for them to dwell in. And you shall give to the Levites pasturelands around the cities. 3 The cities shall be theirs to dwell in, and their pasturelands shall be for their cattle and for their livestock and for all their beasts. 4 The pasturelands of the cities, which you shall give to the Levites, shall reach from the wall of the city outward a thousand cubits all around. 5 And you shall measure, outside the city, on the east side two thousand cubits, and on the south side two thousand cubits, and on the west side two thousand cubits, and on the north side two thousand cubits, the city being in the middle. This shall belong to them as pastureland for their cities. 6 “The cities that you give to the Levites shall be the six cities of refuge, where you shall permit the manslayer to flee, and in addition to them you shall give forty-two cities. 7 All the cities that you give to the Levites shall be forty-eight, with their pasturelands. 8 And as for the cities that you shall give from the possession of the people of Israel, from the larger tribes you shall take many, and from the smaller tribes you shall take few; each, in proportion to the inheritance that it inherits, shall give of its cities to the Levites.”

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)

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)

Cities of Refuge

9 And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 10 “Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When you cross the Jordan into the land of Canaan, 11 then you shall select cities to be cities of refuge for you, that the manslayer who kills any person without intent may flee there. 12 The cities shall be for

you a refuge from the avenger, that the manslayer may not die until he stands before the congregation for judgment. 13 And the cities that you give shall be your six cities of refuge. 14 You shall give three cities beyond the Jordan, and three cities in the land of Canaan, to be cities of refuge. 15 These six cities shall be for refuge for the people of Israel, and for the stranger and for the sojourner among them, that anyone who kills any person without intent may flee there. 16 “But if he struck him down with an iron object, so that he died, he is a murderer. The murderer shall be put to death. 17 And if he struck him down with a stone tool that could cause death, and he died, he is a murderer. The murderer shall be put to death. 18 Or if he struck him down with a wooden tool that could cause death, and he died, he is a murderer. The murderer shall be put to death. 19 The avenger of blood shall himself put the murderer to death; when he meets him, he shall put him to death. 20 And if he pushed him out of hatred or hurled something at him, lying in wait, so that he died, 21 or in enmity struck him down with his hand, so that he died, then he who struck the blow 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 he pushed him suddenly without enmity, or hurled anything on him without lying in wait 23 or used a stone that could cause death, and without seeing him dropped it on him, so that he died, though he was not his enemy and did not seek his harm, 24 then the congregation shall judge between the manslayer and the avenger of blood, in accordance with these rules. 25 And the congregation shall rescue the manslayer from the hand of the avenger of blood, and the congregation shall restore him to his city of refuge to which he had fled, and he shall live in it until the death of the high priest who was anointed with the holy oil. 26 But if the manslayer shall at any time go beyond the boundaries of his city of refuge to which he fled, 27 and the avenger of blood finds him outside the boundaries of his city of refuge, and the avenger of blood kills the manslayer, he shall not be guilty of blood. 28 For he must remain in his city of refuge until the death of the high priest, but after the death of the high priest the manslayer may return to the land of his possession. 29 And these things shall be for a statute and rule for you throughout your generations in all your dwelling places. 30 “If anyone kills a person, the murderer shall be put to death on the evidence of witnesses. But no person shall be put to death on the testimony of one witness. 31 Moreover, you shall accept no ransom for the life of a murderer, who is guilty of death, but he shall be put to death. 32 And you shall accept no ransom for him who has fled to his city of refuge, that he may return to dwell in the land before the death of the high priest. 33 You shall not pollute the land in which you live, for blood pollutes the land, and no atonement can be made for the land for the blood that is shed in it, except by the blood of the one who shed it. 34 You shall not defile the land in which you live, in the midst of which I dwell, for I the LORD dwell in the midst of the people of Israel.”

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 enmity 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 *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)