

Run for your lives!

Intro: Imagine that you in a place where everything seems calm and suddenly someone bursts into the room and exclaims at the top of his voice, “Run for your lives!”

Assuming that the person was not out of his mind, we would presume that some real danger was lurking and that the best possibility of escape from it was to immediately flee from the danger.

There is a text in the NT where it would appear that it would be warranted to say to every person “run for your lives!” Consider the words of the Hebrew writer:

“In the same way God, desiring even more to show to the heirs of the promise the unchangeableness of His purpose, interposed with an oath, in order that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we may have strong encouragement, we who have fled for refuge in laying hold of the hope set before us.”
(Hebrews 6:17–18)

It would appear that in this statement the writer of Hebrews, Barnabas, who was a priest and who may very well be writing to the priests who became Christians in Jerusalem, speaks about something very familiar to them. Our studies in Numbers and Deuteronomy will help us here.

OT Cities of Refuge

In our study of the OT we see that cities of refuge were familiar to all Israelites. Six cities were designated “cities of refuge.” They were intended to be made available to all

The 3 Transjordanian cities were “Bezer in the wilderness on the tableland for the Reubenites, and Ramoth in Gilead (Josh. 20:8).

The 3 cities west of the Jordan were “Kedesh in Galilee in the hill country of Naphatali, and Shechem in the hill country of Ephraim, and Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron) in the hill country of Judah” (Jos 20:7)

It also happens that all of these cities of refuge were among the 48 cities inherited by the Levites (Num. 35:6).

And they had an important function (Num. 35 Deut. 19)

If anyone were to take the life of another deliberately, the next of kin was assigned to be the avenger of the blood of the deceased and to bring about justice on behalf of his family. He was to pursue and kill the murderer. There was no possibility of ransom. If any person accidentally took the life of another (involuntary manslaughter), he too was vulnerable to execution by the next of kin, the avenger of blood. However, the cities of refuge were designed to protect that person from what would have been

certain death. The person who accidentally killed another would literally run for his life to the city of refuge nearest him. While in that city he was protected from the one who sought his life. He could not be touched. He was instructed to stay there until the death of the high priest, at which time, he could return to his inheritance (Num. 35:22-28). In a sense you might say that only the death of the high priest could set him free.

Finding refuge in God

It was but a natural step to take the idea of the cities of refuge and apply them figuratively to God. The psalms often speak of the Lord as the refuge of the people of God when in danger. When they flee to Him they are safe from their enemies or what threatens them.

“O taste and see that the LORD is good; How blessed is the man who takes refuge in Him!” (Psalm 34:8)

“The LORD redeems the soul of His servants; And none of those who take refuge in Him will be condemned.” (Psalm 34:22)

“The LORD redeems the soul of His servants; And none of those who take refuge in Him will be condemned.” (Psalm 34:22)

“The righteous man will be glad in the LORD, and will take refuge in Him; And all the upright in heart will glory.” (Psalm 64:10)

“I will say to the LORD, “My refuge and my fortress, My God, in whom I trust!”” (Psalm 91:2)

It is against this rich background that the Hebrew draws to describe the salvation of the believer.

The message of the Hebrew writer

There is an imminent danger

The danger is sin. It calls for the eternal death of the sinner.

“For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 6:23)

The sinner is unable to provide any redemption for himself, since he has no means to repay his debt. Paul likens our sin to a “certificate of debt” which we cannot pay.

“having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us and which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.” (Colossians 2:14)

There is a place to flee

The Hebrew writer suggests that the sinner has a “place to flee.”

He does not flee to a city; but like the psalmists, He flees to God in faith—He is our place of safety.

“This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, a hope both sure and steadfast and one which enters within the veil, where Jesus has entered as a forerunner for us, having become a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.” (Hebrews 6:19–20)

Think of the picture the Hebrew envisions based on the OT tabernacle which he considered a type and shadow of the true one (Heb. 8:1).

The veil represents the body or flesh of Jesus which He offered as a sacrifice for sin.

“Since therefore, brethren, we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh,” (Hebrews 10:19–20)

Likewise, we can see from this text that inside the veil is the most holy place, the throne room of God in heaven. Jesus has entered that place before us securing through His shed blood protection from the vengeance of God. Since our high priest has died, we can be set free from the consequences of sin.

“Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him.” (Romans 5:9)

Jesus is our “forerunner.” Consequently we may follow Him there to safety, no longer fearful of the danger of spiritual death.

For the Christian, God is our refuge; and consequently we have a hope to anchor our souls against the trials and temptations of life.

That place of safety is available to all.

Just the OT provided a place of refuge for people everywhere, so the way has been prepared for everyone to enter that holy place and find refuge.

No one is excluded. Jesus died for all, not merely for the elect as Calvinism teaches. Everyone is invited to receive His forgiveness.

“Do homage to the Son, lest He become angry, and you perish in the way, For His wrath may soon be kindled. How blessed are all who take refuge in Him!” (Psalm 2:12)

There is safety there forever.

We can be secure in the presence of the Lord.

All that the Father gives Me shall come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out. (John 6:37)

It is interesting to remember that the security of the one who fled for refuge endured to the death of the high priest. But since our high priest will never die, then we are safe forever, if we stay in the presence of God.

Hence, also, He is able to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them. (Hebrews 7:25)

But there is great danger if we leave the place of refuge.

And we might also remember that if the person who fled for refuge left the place of refuge, then he could be killed by the avenger.

So if we do not stay with God, protected by the redeeming blood of Jesus, then we too lose that protection. Not surprisingly the Hebrew warns that those who have fled for refuge can experience the vengeance of God if they turn away from Him.

“For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain terrifying expectation of judgment, and THE FURY OF A FIRE WHICH WILL CONSUME THE ADVERSARIES. Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know Him who said, “VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY.” And again, “THE LORD WILL JUDGE HIS PEOPLE.” It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” (Hebrews 10:26–31)

The God who is a refuge for the believer will become the avenger to those who leave His presence in unbelief.

Conclusion: If the Hebrew writer were here tonight, he might solemnly warn us, “Run for your lives!” Do not allow the eternal consequences of sin to overtake you and destroy you forever; but rather flee to God for refuge, flee to the veil that atones for your sin and then enter boldly into the throne room of God to stay.