

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Cities of Refuge: Shechem

Good morning and welcome to *Truth for Today* where we are continuing with our series on the six Cities of Refuge, as recorded in the book of Numbers 35. Last week my colleague, and brother in the Lord, George Stevens, introduced the series, in addition to discussing the city of Kadesh. Today, I shall be dealing with Shechem, which was situated in the hill country allotted to the tribe of Ephraim, in the neighbourhood of Mount Gerizim. The site of Shechem in the present day is Tell Balata, which itself is a suburb of the Palestinian town of Nablus, on the west bank of the Jordan. Some of the ancient buildings, which remain on this site date back thousands of years and are listed by UNESCO as being of outstanding historical interest.

Perhaps a reminder of the purpose of the cities of refuge will be timely, just in case you did not tune in to last week's broadcast. To do this, I shall read from Joshua 20:1-10: *"Then the LORD said to Joshua, 'Say to the people of Israel, 'Appoint the cities of refuge, of which I spoke to you through Moses, that the manslayer who strikes any person without intent or unknowingly may flee there. They shall be for you a refuge from the avenger. He shall flee to one of these cities and shall stand at the entrance of the gate of the city and explain his case to the elders of that city. Then they shall take him into the city and give him a place, and he shall remain with them. And if the avenger of blood pursues him, they shall not give up the manslayer into his hand, because he struck his neighbour unknowingly, and did not hate him in the past. And he shall remain in that city until he has stood before the congregation for judgement, until the death of him who is high priest at the time. Then the manslayer may return to his own town and his own home, to the town from which he fled.'"*

That rather long passage, which I read from the English Standard Version of the Bible, clearly states the reason why the cities were established. Can I hear someone saying what have these cities of refuge, which have long since disappeared, to do with us in our day? I would judge that the whole idea of these cities shows how God established a way of escape for perpetrators of unintentional deaths from those seeking blood vengeance. It could be that these cities served to prevent excesses, which could develop from a "blood feud". If, while in the safety of one of these cities, it was proved that the killing was unintentional, the refuge seeker would have to remain there until the death of the high priest, meaning that a definite period of detention was established for the person who sought refuge. Within the regulations that governed these six cities we can see something of God's concern with mercy and justice.

The particular city that I have been allocated for this morning's talk is Shechem, as I said when I started a minute or so ago. It is time that we began to examine that city. It is important for us to note that, long before the children of Israel settled in the Promised Land, Shechem was the first site that engaged Abraham's attention, as we can read in Genesis 12:6-7: *"Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak at Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. Then the LORD appeared to Abram and said, 'To your offspring I will give this land.' So he built there an altar to the LORD, who had appeared to him."*

That God appeared to Abram at Shechem emphasises its importance in the religious history of Israel. If we turn to Acts 7:2-3, we will hear Stephen saying where Abram's journey began: *"Brothers and fathers, hear me. The God of Glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, and said to him, 'Go out from your land and from your kindred and go into the land that I will show you.'"*

One can imagine the relief in Abram's heart when his calling by God was confirmed as he reached Shechem, where he received the confirmation of that calling in the appearing of the LORD to him. Abraham is known for his faith. In fact, he is known as the father of the faithful, yet he must have been strengthened by the experience at Shechem, where he built an altar so that he could better express his thanks to God.

There are interesting and important points that need further attention from this incident at Shechem that we have just read from Genesis and The Acts. The first is the title "the God of Glory" who appeared to Abraham before he left Mesopotamia. This, as Arthur Pink, the well-known expositor, has pointed out was the first recorded appearing of God since Adam and Eve were banished from Eden. Consequently this magnifies the grace of God that Abraham was granted the privilege of knowing something of the God of glory, a title that is not used again in Scripture, except in Psalm 29. What a contrast for Abram, living among people who worshipped idols, to be called to follow and worship the God of glory!

We have already stated that the appearing of God to Abram at Shechem would be a welcome confirmation to him, as he had made the long journey from Mesopotamia to Canaan. We must not suppose that Abram himself came from a family that was any different from those around him. Joshua 24:2 states, and I read from the Authorised Version: "*And Joshua said unto all the people, Thus saith the LORD God of Israel, Your fathers dwelt on the other side of the flood in old time, even Terah, the father of Abraham, and the father of Nahor; and they served other gods.*"

From this Scripture, we learn that there was nothing in Abram which merited God's esteem. The fact of Abram's election by God must be of God's grace not of Abram's worthiness.

We must now return to Shechem itself, so that we can learn more of its importance. This time we will see that years have passed, for now we take up an incident in the life of Jacob, Abraham's grandson: "*And God said unto Jacob, Arise, go up to Bethel, and dwell there: and make there an altar unto God, who appeared unto thee when thou fleddest from the face of Esau, thy brother. Then Jacob said unto his household, and to all that were with him, Put away the foreign gods that are among you, and be clean, and change your garments. And let us arise, and go up to Bethel; and I will make there an altar unto God, who answered me in the day of my distress, and was with me in the way in which I went. And they gave unto Jacob all the foreign gods which were in their hand, and all their earrings which were in their ears; and Jacob hid them under the oak which was by Shechem*" (Genesis 35:1-4).

The one point from this account that I wish to emphasise is that Shechem was the place where all that was unsuitable for the worship of a holy God was purged from the possession of those that followed Him. We do well to learn that lesson.

There is one more visit to Shechem that I wish to make while we are in the book of Genesis. Bowing to pressure of time I will not read it, but you will find the account in Genesis 37:12-36. Most of you who are listening this morning will be aware of some of the details in that chapter as it tells of Joseph's betrayal. Through Lloyd Webber's musical play, entitled 'Joseph and the Amazing Technicolour Dreamcoat', many who never read the Bible will also be familiar with the outline of the story. My point is that it was to Shechem that Joseph came to seek his brothers, at the behest of his father. In my judgment, we are not stretching Scripture if the story of Joseph is taken to be a picture of the Lord Jesus coming to this world to seek and to save those who were lost.

You might be saying what has this to do with Shechem? The biblical account states that Joseph left his father in Hebron, which means communion or fellowship, to journey to Shechem to seek for his brothers (Genesis 37:14). If we had quoted another reference to Shechem, in Genesis 34:25-30, we would have noticed that it was also a place of sin and sorrow, of wicked passions and evil deeds. Surely we can see in this a foreshadowing of the incarnation of the Lord Jesus, who left His Father's side to enter a sinful world, that we might know something of God's redeeming love.

Before we move on, can I say to anyone who has just joined us that you are listening to *Truth for Today*, where we are considering reference to Shechem, which is one of the cities of refuge mentioned in Joshua 20. From this point, until the end of our time together this morning, I want to concentrate upon the meaning of the word "Shechem" by quoting a passage from the works of Matthew Henry's *Commentary on the Whole Bible*: "Some observe significance in the names of these cities with application to Christ our refuge. I delight not in quibbling upon names, yet I am willing to take notice of these: Kedesh signifies holy, and our refuge is the holy Jesus. Shechem, a shoulder, and the government shall be upon His shoulder. Hebron, fellowship, of Christ Jesus our Lord."

From these words of Matthew Henry, whose commentary has been used by preachers for many, many years, you will gather that Shechem means "shoulder". I also wish to use the suggestion of his and apply the meaning of Shechem, one of the cities of refuge, to the Lord Jesus to whom we have turned as our refuge. Wesley caught the spirit of this in his great hymn, "Jesus, lover of my soul", especially the second verse:

*Other refuge have I none,
Hangs my helpless soul on thee;
Leave, ah! Leave me not alone,
Still support and comfort me:
All my trust on thee is stayed;
All my help from thee I bring;
Cover my defenceless head
With the shadow of thy wing.*

To linger in the New Testament for a moment, with the thought of Shechem meaning "shoulder", there is one parable that stands out. You have probably guessed that I am referring to the story of the Lost Sheep, where the shepherd goes off to search for the one sheep that had gone astray, leaving the safety of the sheepfold. When the Lord told this parable, which you can read in Luke 15:1-7, He was illustrating the way God delights to receive back the lost. In the

story the shepherd goes after the missing sheep and according to Luke 15:5: *“And when he hath found it, he layeth it on his shoulders, rejoicing.”*

I would like to use the last minutes of our time together by referring back to the Old Testament, to the book of Isaiah. There are two passages that I shall read, the first one being Isaiah 22:21-22: *“And I will clothe him with thy robe, and strengthen him with thy girdle, and I will commit thy government into his hand, and he shall be a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and to the house of Judah. And the key of the house of David will I lay upon his shoulder; so shall he open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open.”*

The context is the judgment and fall of Shebna, the steward of the king’s palace. Our verses refer to Eliakim, who replaced Shebna and took all that belonged to him. William Kelly, a biblical scholar and prolific author of commentaries on Scripture in the nineteenth century suggests, in his commentary on Isaiah, that Eliakim is a picture of the Lord Jesus.

You may be puzzled as to why I should bring these verses before us, when I said at the commencement of today’s broadcast that our subject was “Shechem”. I trust that you noticed that I read that the key of the house of David would be laid upon the shoulder of Eliakim. The word for ‘shoulder’, as I said earlier, is ‘shechem’, and that is the whole reason why I quoted these verses. The day will soon come when a greater than Eliakim will come to be seen, and acknowledged by all, as the Messiah. Truly He will bear the key of the house of David, so that what He opens none shall shut. That key is upon His shoulder, the place of safety and security.

For the last few minutes I want to focus our attention on another passage from Isaiah, that speaks of Messiah’s shoulder. If you still have your Bible open in Isaiah please turn to Isaiah 9:6: *“For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulder; and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.”*

Some commentators link this passage with Isaiah 7:14, where Immanuel, the virgin’s son, is mentioned as a sign from the LORD. For instance WE Vine suggests that Isaiah 9:6 is an expansion of the meaning of Immanuel. However we look at it, the verse is full of significance. The One who carries the government upon His shoulder is none other than the Christ of God, who was born into this world. Looking back from our perspective, we believe that that phrase brings before us the truth of Hebrews 2:14, that *“He partakes of flesh and blood that through death He might destroy him that had the power of death.”* If shechem, or shoulder, speaks of power then there could be no greater display of power than One who went into death and came out victorious.

‘Wonderful’ is sometimes translated ‘secret’, though whichever is used it does but express the mystery of the incomprehensible. Another has said that if we contemplate His works, both in creation and in redemption, we shall find some legible characters of this Wonderful LORD indelibly written on them all. Everything that the Lord Jesus did when He suffered at Calvary was wonderful and glorious. As the Counsellor, He has none of the limitations that typify all human counsel for He is the Fount of all knowledge and wisdom, as we can read in Proverbs 8:14.

What can we say of the Mighty God other than He who suffered and died on the cross was ever the Mighty God? The irresistible power of God is ever displayed in that title of Mighty God that was associated in Isaiah’s prophecy with the One who bore the government upon His shoulder.

Finally, there is the title Prince of Peace, which touches our deepest need, which is to be in harmonious relationship with the living God. One thing is certain and that is that we will never establish or find that peace by our own efforts. Serenity of soul can only be experienced by those who have confessed Jesus as Lord and believe that God has raised Him from the dead. As Paul told the Christians at Colosse, *“Christ made peace through the blood of His cross, reconciling all things unto Himself”* (Colossians 1:20).

It might appear that we have wandered far from the subject of Shechem as a city of refuge, yet I would claim that we are still on the same subject. Just as a man might seek refuge in Shechem, in days of old, so we can know God’s peace and security as we rest in the Lord Jesus today. As time has gone, I shall finish by reciting some lines written by George Stevens, who was last week’s speaker on *Truth for Today*. Some years ago George asked the Lord to guide him in writing a hymn a day. This is just one of them:

*“The glory of the knowledge
Of God shines in Your face.
It tells of all the mercy
And speaks to us of grace.”*

*It shows that He is holy;
Declares that He is wise.
It manifests His purpose
And fills our once blind eyes.*

*It's full of loving kindness
And patience that endures.
It proves that He is steadfast
With love that reassures.*

*His justice rides its radiance;
His strength is in each ray,
Oh, what a God we have, Lord!
May we this God display!"*

Good morning and thank you for listening.

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