

Unexpected Turns

Joshua 20-22

Introduction: Life takes unexpected turns. Sometimes those turns seem negative, where we receive bad news, negative circumstances, or hurt. But sometimes the unexpected can come in the form of blessing, out of the blue, and can be life changing.

We come to a section of Joshua that can easily be skipped or brushed over, but we would miss rich principles of how God's character is put on display. We will take a look at two divisions of cities and a division of brothers to find that life takes unexpected turns, but these turns are for our good.

I. **Cities of Refuge: Turning tragedy into justice** (20)

Then the LORD said to Joshua, "Say to the people of Israel, 'Appoint the cities of refuge, of which I spoke 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 of blood.'"

Joshua 20:1-3

The first unexpected turn of events in the dividing of the land was the establishment of the cities of refuge. In **Deuteronomy 19** and **Numbers 35** Moses had instructed the establishment of 6 cities of refuge: 3 on the East of the Jordan, and 3 on the West. There was a clear and specific need for these cities. In the Ancient Near East if a member of your family was killed by another, a member of your family was assigned the position "*avenger of blood*" who would exact revenge on killer. This lined up with the basic teaching of eye for eye, tooth for tooth. Justice was carried out, and the practice was normative (seems like an ancient version of mob justice)

God holds life in very high regard and value, since we are all made in His image. This is why in Genesis 9:5-6, God commanded Noah, "*And for your lifeblood I will require a reckoning: from every beast I will require it and from man. From his fellow man I will require a reckoning for the life of man. 'Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in His own image.'*" This meant that murderers found a universal code of justice in the fact that if they shed innocent blood, their blood would be shed, since they murdered an image bearer of God Himself.

However, there was a need for those deaths that were accidental at the hand of another. Numbers 35 and Deuteronomy 19 lay out the scenario of two men chopping wood, and the head of the axe flew off and killed the other, the man could flee to a city of refuge. An avenger of blood would/could still be assigned, but instead of running and hiding, the man could run to a city of refuge. There he could have his case heard by the elders of the city, and if he were deemed truly innocent of any evil, could remain in the city safely for as long as the high priest serving in that city remained alive. After that, he could return home safely. This was an important part of the universal justice system based on the character and teaching of God.

Now, what was so unexpected about this? It was a system that acknowledged both sin, justice, grace, and mercy. In fact, this is most likely what the writer of Hebrews referred to in **Heb. 6:18**, "*we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us.*" There are a few specifics about these cities that are illustrious of what Christ is and does on our life, as our refuge and strength.

A. They were clearly marked

Deuteronomy 19:3 says, "*You shall measure the distances and divide into three parts the area of the land that the Lord your God gives you as a possession, so that any manslayer can flee to them.*" In other words, these cities were placed in a way that they would not be clumped together or too far away from

any one point. These cities would have been clearly marked, delineated, and known by the inhabitants. Other literature says that roads were built to assure the inadvertent killer could make a smooth path to the cities, and since the nature of this was accidental, ANY person could potentially need to go (not just cold blooded killers). Without making this too parallel, it is clear that we must make the pathway of refuge clear to those in need of redemption. It is our goal to make sure that all people know the way of escape from sin, from destruction, and from judgment. The pathway should be clearly marked for those who realize that they have blood on their hands and need refuge.

B. They were never locked

Cities of any size would be surrounded by a wall and would be guarded at the entrance by a gate. This gate would keep enemies out and thusly would be kept locked up, especially at night. However, cities of refuge would never have their gates locked (could you imagine if you made it to the city with the avenger of blood chasing after you, and when you got there, the door was locked...worst nightmare kind of stuff). This is why Jesus said in **John 6:37** *"All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me, I will never cast out."* We must be reminded that in Christ, the way of salvation is open to those who would believe, and that can come at any time that God draws. We must be ready, willing, and open to share and receive those who God would save.

C. They were refuge for all people

You will notice in the text that these cities were not simply a refuge to the people of Israel, but were open to *"stranger sojourning among them"*. (20:9). In other words, this was justice given universally to all races of people living in land God gave Israel. The salvation offered was not simply to those that were born into God's people, but was offered to those outside. This is the same reminder of the universal call of the gospel into all the world, that God is seeking worshippers who will worship Him in Spirit and truth (John 4:23). Salvation was not about race, culture, or color, but was given based on the eternal justice of God. God's justice must be satisfied and found that satisfaction in Jesus Christ, and Jesus offers forgiveness of sin and reconciliation to God for the glory of God and the joy of ALL PEOPLE.

D. There was only hope within

Unfortunately for some, the city of refuge was only effective if you made it inside the city (and were not truly guilty). If you waited too long, if you did not believe you were in real danger, or if you simply were nonchalant about what was going on around, the city of refuge would do a person no good. A person had to believe, and in his belief, he would act on that belief in running from his pursuer into the hope of refuge from death. This is the same today when it comes to salvation. It does a person no good to have heard the gospel or heard about the gospel, but not repent of their sin and turn to Christ for forgiveness of sins. There is hope within, but judgment without.

II. Cities for Levites: Turning judgment into blessing (21)

Joshua 21:2-3 *"And they said to them at Shiloh in the land of Canaan, 'The LORD commanded through Moses that we be given cities to dwell in, along with their pastureland for our livestock.' So by command of the LORD the people of Israel gave to the Levites the following cities and pasturelands out of their inheritance."*

The second set of unexpected land division was that of the Levites. If you go back to last week we talked about how and why Levi did not receive any land in inheritance. As a result of bringing shame on their father by avenging their sister (read Genesis 34 for the back story if you missed it), both Simeon and Levi's descendants would be scattered during inheritance. However, God has a way of consistently turning judgment, tragedy, and curse, God turns it into blessing, joy, and dancing (Psalm 30:11). God

did this with the tribe of Simeon. Even though they were given land that was sublet from Judah, they shared in the blessings of Judah, including lasting out the Northern Kingdom (which fell in 722 B.C.) and being a part of powerful, kingly reigns there.

A. The special portion Levi received

For Levi, they were not given any specific land, but they were given access to **48 cities** within the nation of Israel itself. These were cities they could live, raise families, and own cattle. It would be from these places that they would serve God as priests, as go-betweens between the people and God Himself. They had a special relationship with God. They would serve in God's temple, serving the Lord and people in worship. "It was said of them that they had 'no portion' in the land because 'their portion was the LORD Himself'.¹ God took a man who was cursed and brought his offspring close.

B. The offspring Levi produced

Not only did Levi have a special portion with God, he produced some of the most faithful and influential offspring in all of Scripture. **Moses** himself was a Levite, who not only had godly parents, but became a giant in terms of faith, leadership, and living a life that was to be emulated (especially in terms of faith - Heb. 11:24-28). **Aaron**, Moses' brother and fellow leader. **Phinehas**, who served faithfully in the role of high priest for 19 years is best known for his exploits in Numbers 25 when he pinned (and it wasn't Pinterest) a man named Zimri and a Moabite woman with whom he was sleeping with a spear. He was zealous for the honor of the Lord and God honored it by stopping a plague that was caused by this wickedness. Finally, **John the Baptist** was a Levite. He was the forerunner of Jesus himself, who fulfilled his roll well even unto his death. Jesus said of John, *"Truly I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist."* (Matt. 11:11)

What do we take from this? We see two main things: **God is consistent and righteous in judgment, but He is also gracious and merciful.** God scattered Levi, meaning they did not get what all the other tribes received. At the time they could have said, "Our future is always going to be less. Will we pay for this sin forever? There is no joy in this." Yet, it is clear God had something great for them. Great, yet different. I've told people this week that God's timing is always perfect, so when something happens (even negative) the timing was perfect, we just don't always see how. God put Levi in a special place forever, not because they deserved it, but because God operates in grace and mercy.

We are not an exclusive product of our past, especially when it comes to our parents - Levi proved to be a deceiver, murderer, and brought shame to his dad. That did not mean Moses was going to do the same. In other words, the gospel breaks cycles, breaks patterns, and allows us to live in a new way. One of phrases that I hear people say that breaks my heart, "this is who I am. I can't change it. Its exactly how my _____ was, so I come by it honestly." This recognizes there are influences and even consequences to how we were raised, what we experienced, and what example we had, but misses the greatness of the gospel to change. If your parent was an alcoholic, this does not predetermine that you will abuse alcohol, and it certainly does not excuse it. Just because you saw your dad treat your mom a certain way, does not predetermine you will treat your wife the same. Each generation has an opportunity to break cycles from the past, but it can only be done through radical transformation of our heart, mind, motives, goals, and righteousness. Be encouraged today if you are experiencing the consequences of sin, either brought by your choices or another: **God turns these into blessing, but the blessing may be different than what you thought it would be.**

¹ James Montgomery Boice, *Joshua*, p. 112.

III. **Civility in War & Peace: Turning disaster into loving truth** (22)

The final unexpected turn took place between brothers. We read a section of Joshua 22 this morning (Josh 22:1-9) that cataloged the farewell to arms between tribes, between brothers. The two and a half tribes to the East had completed their mission. They had fought side by side with their brothers on the West for over 7 years. They had sweat, bled, tasted victory, and done it in trust of the Lord and love for the brother fighting next to him. Joshua gathered them together and charged them to: **observe the commands of Moses, love the Lord their God and walk in His ways, and to cling and serve the Lord with all of their heart and soul.** (Josh 22:5). The end of the section ends with these tribes taking their wealth with them, hugging their brothers, and you could just imagine that tears were shed.

However, the next section tells of something potentially tragic that happens next. This amicable separation was on the brink of war, and the worst kind of war: **Civil War**. We have experienced this tragic kind of war in our country, where brother kills brother and nation kills nation. There are reasons for these wars, but often they get convoluted as the scope of violence escalates. What the rest of Joshua 22 records could have been one of the worst wars in history. Yet it was avoided when **truth and love collided**.

The story was simple, and looking down at the story one can easily see what happened: *misunderstanding, leads to drawn conclusion, leads to action, leads to counter action, leads to devastation*. This cycle has been repeated for generations. The two and a half tribes left for the other side, but before returning home, they set up an "**altar of imposing size**" (22:10). Their purpose was to do it **to remember**, as a **witness** between the two sides so that neither would forget their union. The tribes on the West saw this as a direct affront to God (22:16) and a desire to separate. They went and confronted their brothers, causing a tense interaction, but in the end, joyful reiteration of unity. Let's look at four principles that we glean from this interaction, because we learn from both sides how to uphold and confront with the truth, but do it all in love.

Truth demands confrontation. It must be loving confrontation, but there must be confrontation nonetheless.

Francis Schaeffer

A. Truth in love is willing to pay the price

Confrontation is a negative word in our vocabulary. We avoid it, excuse, and look for any reason NOT to do it. We will claim fake love, humility, and compassion to NOT confront another with the truth or for the truth. We live in a day that battle lines are drawn between churches, in the blogosphere, and in social media. We are motivated by that to cast it all out, claiming that ignorance is bliss in these things, and these issues do not matter in the long wrong. Yet, **the battle for what it is and for Truth itself will always be something we engage in, ESPECIALLY AMONG BROTHERS.**

Confronting another in the truth in love is always costly. For the tribes of the West, it cost them three key things:

- 1) Their own comfort** - Joshua 22:12 is one of the more poignant verses in all of Scripture if we know the context. They were exhausted, tired of fighting, and ready to move on as farmers, businessmen, and enjoy peace. Yet when they heard what the tribes had done, there was not hesitation but sorrowful determination to take up arms against those they LOVED THE MOST. Confronting those we love the most is always the most difficult because the pain and emotion we feel cannot be separated by the act.
- 2) Their future relationship** - Not only were they willing to take up arms, they were willing to **risk future relationship**. Confrontation demands risk. Even if this did not lead to war, they were willing embrace tension at family gatherings from there on out.

3) Their own material - In order to avoid the spiritual rebellion of their brothers, they offered for them to come back over and share their land (22:19). In other words, I'd rather have you take my land then live in a sinful way in yours. To put it into today's terms, I'd rather have you come live in my house (I'll sleep on the floor) if it means you no longer live in sexual immorality with your girlfriend. Please come to my house and cause a small level of discomfort rather than continually living in unrighteousness. This is the price we are willing to pay to uphold the holiness of God and His people.

B. Truth in love knows what its fighting for

This was not a disagreement of preference or the way someone went about things. This was clearly an issue of **God's holiness and glory**. There was historical precedent that building improper altars and offering improper worship led to disastrous results (22:17-18). The issue was not personal jealousy or a selfish tiff, but what was being done was offensive to a holy God.

This means that we need **wisdom** in what and when to confront. There are some things that we need to learn to simply discuss better (like issues of specific doctrine, choices in child-rearing or specific decisions in marriage), but other things are not as much discussions as clearly defined truth claims. The Western delegate did not dance around the issue, but led with "***What is this breach of faith that you have committed against God and Israel...***" There are things worth fighting and dying for. Issues of the Bible's inerrancy, the truth of the gospel and salvation, the deity of Christ, and holiness of God are all issues that we will be courageous to uphold. Issues that have to do with sin and holiness of the individual or family will be confronted with the hope of restoration, repentance, and reconciliation. Love demands this, and love is our motive and mode.

C. Truth in love is willing to listen

Here is the great part of the story. Often in confrontation, especially if one party is involved in sin, the reaction does not go well. There is a reaction to the confrontation which leads to more separation. But there were two amazing responses to the original confrontation:

- **The East Tribes also were willing to uphold God's glory** - They explained their side of the story, and were willing to say that if they were doing something idolatrous, they should be killed (22:22). They explained their reason and motivation for building the altar, and it was not for worship but for witness (22:27), and their goal was not to rebel but to keep unity now and in the future (22:29)
- **The West Tribes were quick to listen & hear before acting** - If we would all learn this lesson, this would radically change our families, friendships and this church. When we have already drawn a conclusion about a situation or person, we fail to actually listen to them or their story. Think about times that you have done this, only to discover the other side of the story, which was completely different than what we thought. Phinehas and the delegation **heard the story, discerned the explanation, and responded:**

"Today we know that the LORD is in our midst, because you have not committed this breach of faith against the LORD. Now you have delivered the people of Israel from the hand of God. (22:31).

Do we take the time to hear and listen? Do we ask the right questions? I've learned it ALWAYS easier to hear about a situation and draw conclusions than actually interact with them. Blanket statements don't cost much, but interacting with messy people and complicated situations mean we must trust, depend, walk in wisdom, and be willing to admit we were wrong. If we are going to speak the truth in love, we must **listen to the truth in love**. Notice that this is the same principle we see in the city of refuge and this conflict.

D. Truth in love is hopeful and embraces change

If we truly care about the glory of God to the point of confronting in love, the hope of change and restoration is the ultimate goal. The West and East tribes left this tense situation with reaffirmed love and witness with each other. They cleared up misunderstanding, made sure there was no true sin, and were willing to change directions that they started in. They reaffirmed that this altar was a witness between them and the LORD (22:34), and left as brothers.

Sometimes we confront to win the fight, not win the brother. This does not honor the Lord nor display love. We live in a time where we must be courageous with the truth, courageous in love, and courageous to listen and accept others who do things differently but not opposed to the truth.

Concluding thoughts and questions:

- What truth is worth standing for? What are areas that we need to confront other believers on? What areas can we agree to disagree and still have unity? What keeps us away from rightfully fighting for the truth?
- Why is love so hard to maintain in fighting for or upholding the truth? What should love look like during confrontation?
- Are there people that you draw a conclusion on without actually listening to them? Are you willing to be wrong in your assessment?

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