

"Appoint out for you cities of refuge,  
whereof I spake unto you by the hand of Moses:

"That the slayer that killeth any person  
unawares and unwittingly may flee thither: and  
they shall be your refuge from the avenger of blood."

- Joshua xx, 2, 3

Joshua xx

Luke vi, 27-end

Psalm 144

New Book of Worship, Psalm 91, pp. 69, 70

It was a practice among the Jews that when one had been killed, his relatives should avenge the wrong by pursuing and killing the one who had committed the deed. The pursuer was called the "avenger of blood."

In the division of the land among the twelve tribes no district was given to the tribe of Levi. Instead, this tribe was given cities, forty-eight in all, scattered throughout the whole land. Six of these Levite cities were appointed for a special purpose and called cities of refuge. These were provided so that if anyone had killed another by accident, without meaning to do it, he might flee to one of the cities of refuge and be safe.

This provision was not intended to protect a man who had killed another on purpose, who hated him and lay in wait for him, and struck him with a stone or an instrument of iron or wood, but one who suddenly "without enmity" or without seeing the victim or meaning to hurt him should kill another.

If a man fled to a city of refuge, his case would be examined by the people. If it was found that he really meant to do the wrong, he must die. If he did not mean to do it, he could live safe in the city of refuge but must not go outside of the city, or the "avenger of blood" might kill him. But when the one who was high priest in those days died, then the man might go back from the city of refuge to his own city and be safe.

There was an ancient law among the Jews, which was expressed in the words "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." The Jews could not be led to do right from the love of right; so they were allowed to preserve the best order possible to them from the spirit of revenge. Spiritually this law - "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth"- reveals the fact that if one does wrong to another, he does the same injury to his own soul. The Lord stated this fact in the Sermon on the Mount by saying, "With what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again." And Psalm 9 says of the heathen, "In the net which they hid is their own foot taken."

The desire for revenge is a characteristic not only of the Jews of ancient times. It was this same spirit in the hearts of the Christian-world that conceived the doctrine of the vicarious atonement and made belief in it possible. The nat-

ural man favors it and justifies it; so Christians have been held in some kind of order by the fear of a God of anger and revenge. We do not have to learn to be revengeful. A little child will be revengeful, though it has never seen the spirit of revenge exercised. For this reason revenge is said to be natural.

No one is ever born free from the feeling of revenge. Before one has recognized and overcome this tendency the first impulse, when an injury is done, is to repay in kind. The natural man does this because he thinks that there is no other way of self-protection. While he is in this thought, revenge is not so destructive to him. Therefore the Jews were allowed to exercise revenge, and the Lord so overruled their customs that they not only preserved a certain kind of order, but their acts represented the internal effects of doing as they did. An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth was the practice because such is the law of the spirit. The avenger relentlessly pursued the evildoer until the evil he had done was visited upon himself. No one can possibly do an evil without that evil's coming back upon himself. And the evil that comes back upon one is more destructive than the wrong done to another. If one kills another, he injures the body only. One may tell what is not true about another and it may not injure the maligned man at all if others see that it is false and do not believe it. But one can never tell an untruth without hurting himself. One may cheat another out of this world's goods, but at the same time he robs himself of heavenly riches. Spiritually it is eye for eye, life for life, and the avenger pursues until the penalty is exacted. So deadly are all forms of sin.

One of the forms of evil most destructive to heavenly life is revenge. Revenge is hatred. It destroys love because it is its opposite. Where love is, revenge cannot be, and where revenge is, love cannot be. And it should be noted that it is not the injury that we do to another that hurts us but the feeling of revenge itself. Consequently whether one who would do an evil actually injures the other or not, the evil has already come upon himself as the destruction of heavenly love in the soul. And the measure of evil that recoils back upon one is to the finest exactness just the measure that he would do to another. This balance is spiritually adjusted, for with the intensity with which one burns to take revenge, with just that intensity love, compassion, and tenderness are laid waste.

When one realizes that he will injure himself in the eternal life to the extent that he cherishes revenge, he will beware of desiring to harm another. There is never any possible escape from the avenger, from the law that rules over the spirit: "He that killeth any man shall surely be put to death."

It may seem discouraging to think that in any one evil there are many others, and that when one does one evil, many are committed. But the converse is true also: in every good desire there are many allied good desires; so he who tries to keep one commandment is in the effort to keep them all.

And in our battle against feelings of revenge we have this to encourage us. We have a city of refuge. Under Jewish customs there were cities of refuge for those who killed unintentionally, so that the innocent were not hurt. The wrong that we do not intending harm does not hurt our souls. It is the intention to injure another that hurts us. The innocence or ignorance in us is our city of refuge. But we should go further than ceasing to desire to do our enemies injury. We should actually want to do them good. "For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? do not even the publicans the same?" There is no virtue in doing good only to those who do good to us. It does not require strength of character to love our friends. That is natural. But there is virtue in loving our enemies. And it does require strength of character to do good to those who do evil to us. When one does evil to us, the natural impulse is to return evil for evil. The avenger in us rises up. Have we then a city of refuge? Have we a place to which we may flee from our own feelings of ill-will and retaliation? Can we escape from the destruction that our angry feelings would visit upon our souls? Yes. Our city of refuge is a system of doctrine, a way of thinking to which we may resort to escape from our vengeful feelings.

The Lord has revealed that city, and a beautiful and strong city it is. "Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust." This is the strong city to which we must flee from anger, resentment, and ill-will, or whatsoever from the avenger may take within us. This city is so beautiful for situation, so fortified in its peace, so grand in its towers of heavenly thought, so sacred from the voice of the Lord that is heard within it that we should flee into it as one fleeing for his life, which is to enter into it with faith and joy. For do we not see that there is no wisdom in hating, and in allowing ourselves to indulge in passions that reduce us to the level of beasts?

And why does the Lord want us not to hate but to love those that hate us? "That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven." That is, He wants us to love our enemies that we may receive His love in our souls, that our hearts may be clean and pure, that we may be heirs of His virtues in this life and forever in the heavens. We should love the welfare of all that we may prepare ourselves for uses in heaven. There is no feeling of revenge in the Lord. He is so strong that He sees such feelings as only weakness. He sees how such feelings can but come back upon the soul of the one who indulges in them. Let us think then how the Lord from the greatness of true strength seeks the welfare of all, and let us strive to be like Him. In learning about the Lord's life and trying to be like Him we appoint for ourselves a city of refuge, a sure refuge from the avenger - our own evil desires, the foes of our own household.