

# Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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## Cities of Refuge: Hebron and Bezer

I was in London a few weeks ago and was walking in the late evening through Regents Park. It was a lovely, early summer evening and I was wandering around in short sleeves. Then a very dark cloud rolled over and, within a couple of minutes, the heavens opened and it was time to seek cover! It was some distance to the nearest shelter so I took refuge under a great big oak tree. The deluge lasted for 10 minutes or more but, apart from the odd drip, the big old tree kept me dry.

Where do you go for refuge when one of life's storms breaks? God provided the six cities of refuge for the children of Israel. Six cities in a compact country like Israel meant that one was always fairly close at hand for anybody in need, and nobody was disadvantaged by where they lived. God has provided just **one** Christ Jesus for us, but in the various aspects of His character and work, God has made sure that we always have a refuge in Christ whatever our particular circumstances may be.

### Hebron

The first city we are considering today is Hebron. Hebron is perhaps the best known of the six. The word Hebron means association or fellowship, and today we will be thinking about Christ as the source of our fellowship. A non-English friend of mine says that he likes to think of fellowship as "two fellows in a ship"! By ship, he really means a small boat like a dinghy or a rowing boat. His point is that any two people in a small boat really need to work together. If they want to row effectively they will need to coordinate the timing and strength of their strokes or they will end up going round in circles! If they don't balance their weight and position carefully they might both end up swimming!

They are in it together: co-dependent and sharing in the outcome, good or bad. It is rather a good illustration of the fellowship of Christians, but first we need to think a little about the **basis** of our fellowship with other Christians. We might be from the same country or social class. We might share a taste in music or have the same sense of humour. We might agree on church order or have the same view of baptism, but our fundamental connection to each other, and the basis of our fellowship, is our mutual relationship with Christ as our Saviour and Lord. One Christian teacher says that we tend to attach the word fellowship to all our interactions with Christians: If we drink tea with non-Christians it is a social event; if we drink tea with Christians it is fellowship! The word is invested with a bit more meaning than that in the New Testament! Let's look at a few Bible passages in which it is used and see what we can learn.

**Acts 2:42 - "And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers."**

Most commentators agree that the word "apostles" attaches as much to the fellowship as to the doctrine. The apostles shared a set of beliefs - their doctrine. It was not exclusively theirs: there were others who believed the same things. It wasn't theirs by rights of invention: the doctrines came from God by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The doctrine was the apostles' because they all held to it, preached it and lived by it. The apostles' fellowship was, likewise, something that they all shared in and lived by. It was not exclusive to twelve men and, just as the apostles' doctrine has far outlived the 12, so the fellowship is still enjoyed by those today who follow the faith and character of the apostles. It is only exclusive in the sense that you have to be a true believer in Christ to share in it. But, since new life in Christ is freely available to all who will come to Him as Saviour, it is a very open kind of exclusivity!

**1 John 1:3 "That which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ."**

If the promise of being admitted into the fellowship of the apostles sounds impressive, what can we say about fellowship with the Father and with His Son? Fellowship indicates that something is shared. What do we share with God the Father and God the Son? Fundamentally, we share the life of Christ that is given to us when we believe in Him. If we are risen with Christ and "alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord", as Romans 6:11 says, then that is a very fundamental connection with Christ. Since the Father and the Son are totally united and One together, it is not possible to be in fellowship with the Son and not be in fellowship with the Father. The reassurance of that fellowship

should be a very real refuge in times of difficulty.

I have done a little bit of sailing in small boats over the last few years and, in very windy conditions, there is all the difference in the world between being in the boat by yourself, or with somebody who is unskilled, and being in the boat with somebody who is skilled, confident and relaxed! Our fellowship with the Father and with His Son, means that we are never by ourselves in a storm. One of the wonderful things about this fellowship is that it is not based on our performance; it is based on the death and resurrection of Christ. My experience and enjoyment of that fellowship might be spoiled by my failure, but the solid link cannot be broken and the enjoyment is very quickly restored by our confession and return to Him.

Wonderful though our refuge in the fellowship of Christ is, I must confess that there are times when what I need is another human being standing next to me and sharing what I feel. I don't think this is necessarily a sign that we are not trusting God fully. We read in our local Bible study recently, the account of the Lord's prayers in Gethsemane from Matthew 26:36-39. *"Then Jesus came with them to a place called Gethsemane, and said to the disciples, 'Sit here while I go and pray over there.' And He took with Him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and He began to be sorrowful and deeply distressed. Then He said to them, 'My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death. Stay here and watch with Me.' He went a little farther and fell on His face, and prayed."* Nobody would ever dare accuse Jesus of not fully valuing His relationship with God, or of seeking encouragement elsewhere. But at this dreadful moment, the man Christ Jesus wanted to have His disciples as near as they could be and watching with Him. There might be times when, like Paul, we have to say, *"... No one stood with me, but all forsook me ... But the Lord stood with me and strengthened me"* (2 Timothy 4:16-17). But that is not the normal situation for believers. God gives us the fellowship of other Christians so that we can experience His goodness through them. That brings us back to our "two fellows in a ship".

Believers need to be working together in harmony for that fellowship to be fully enjoyed. The letter to the Philippians contains a series of exhortations to be 'likeminded' and 'striving together'. It expresses the need for believers to be pulling in the same direction and pulling together. It's as if Paul is the cox in the rowing boat calling out the stroke so that all the oarsmen pull in unison. Perhaps it is better to think of the Holy Spirit as the cox, which brings us neatly to our next verse!

**Philippians 2:1** *"Therefore if there is any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and mercy, fulfil my joy by being likeminded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind."*

The fellowship of believers is the "fellowship of the Spirit". The Spirit is resident in every believer, and He is seen here to be the source of that fellowship. How apt, that we have now seen Father, Son and Holy Spirit all connected with our fellowship. Here though the thought is not of fellowship **with** the Spirit but fellowship **of** the Spirit. That means that the Spirit is the one who works in us to produce a real expression of the fellowship of Christians, and the fellowship should lead to believers being of one mind. Clearly that does not mean that we are to reach agreement on every single matter of doctrine and practice, but that we are to be sufficiently thinking like Christ, in the power of the Spirit, that we will work together happily towards the same ends. One of the 'ends' or 'purposes' is in our next verse, also from Philippians.

**Philippians 1:5** *"Your fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now."*

Paul talks about the 'fellowship in the gospel' that the Philippians had shared with him. From the context, and from the accounts in the book of Acts, we can see that this fellowship existed primarily in the financial support that the Philippians sent early and regularly to Paul. They so enjoyed the blessings of the gospel that they wanted others to share in them as well; so they sent gifts to Paul to help him carry on his missionary work. Paul, rather beautifully, refers to this not just as a gift for support but 'fellowship in the gospel'.

In other words, they were working together with him in the preaching and teaching of the message of Christ. Paul was no doubt greatly encouraged by this sign of communion. We can encourage and support workers in the gospel in the same way today.

If we can actually work together, side by side (like Timothy) that is great: if we can support in giving and in prayers then that is great too. We can make sure that no servant of the Lord feels that he or she is working entirely alone by joining in this fellowship in the gospel.

**2 Corinthians 8:3-4, “I bear witness that according to their ability, yes, and beyond their ability, they were freely willing, imploring us with much urgency that we would receive the gift and the fellowship of the ministering to the saints.”**

So Paul describes, to the Corinthians, the generosity of the Macedonian Christians in giving to support the poverty stricken believers in Jerusalem. The people in the area of Macedonia (modern day Greece,) had probably never been to Israel, they were not Jews themselves, and you might have imagined they would feel little connection with Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. But when they heard of the suffering and need of their fellow believers, they insisted on giving very generously to Paul so that he could take the money to the saints in Jerusalem. Paul seems to represent this as a kind of three way fellowship of ministering. The Macedonians did the giving, Paul did the delivering (ultimately at the cost of his life) and the Jerusalem Christians did the receiving. All together they were joined in a fellowship of ministering to the saints. In fact Paul was telling the Corinthians about this in order to stir them up to giving. Here is another encouraging work that we can still take part in today. This kind of sharing between believers can help to unite them.

Paul asks the believers in Rome to pray, amongst other things, that the gift would be well received by the Christians in Jerusalem and so foster unity between Jewish and Gentile believers.

## Bezer

Our second city for today is Bezer. Bezer means ‘fortress’, and here we are thinking about Christ as our defender and keeper. Let’s read the start of 2 Samuel 22: *“Then David spoke to the LORD the words of this song when the LORD had delivered him from the hand of all his enemies, and from the hand of Saul. And he said: ‘The LORD is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer; the God of my strength, in whom I will trust; my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold and my refuge; my Saviour, You save me from violence. I will call upon the LORD, who is worthy to be praised; so shall I be saved from my enemies”* (2 Samuel 22:1-4)

This song of deliverance has lots of parallels with Psalm 18, and the thought of God as a rock and a fortress is dominant in at least four other Psalms (see Psalm 31:1-3, Psalm 71:3, Psalm 91:2, Psalm 144:2).

The underlying thought is of a person who has enemies and is under attack. He is feeling vulnerable and in need of a safe place to shelter: a fortress or a refuge. Although there is a warrior element involved, the emphasis is rather different from that of Ephesians 6:10-18 where a soldier is being dressed to do battle. In this context the soldier wants to disappear into a safe castle and be protected from the enemy, not go out and meet him in mortal combat! David experienced both these situations in his life, and so do we. Sometimes we will be like David going out to meet Goliath in God’s strength (1 Samuel 17:45): bold in our standing up for Christ and ready to advance against the enemy. At other times we will feel that our enemies are altogether too strong for us, and we will want to run into the safe rock and fortress of God’s care for us.

Notice the division of responsibilities in 2 Samuel 22:4. David expresses what he needs to do in the phrase *“I will call upon the LORD.”* He describes God’s response as *“So shall I be saved from my enemies.”* There are times in all of our lives when we just do not know where to turn. We know that David had times when he thought capture and death were unavoidable. There seemed to be no hiding places left, and no rest at all. In those times, David learned to “call upon the LORD” (2 Samuel 22:4). Have you learned that lesson from life’s difficulties? Too often we regard money, power or our own ingenuity as our best keeper and defender. We need to learn to respond to each new difficulty by calling out to Christ as our keeper. He who has promised *“I will never leave you nor forsake you”* (Hebrews 13:5) wants to be trusted and called on.

Notice how the help moves from passive to active in 2 Samuel 22:2. *“The LORD is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer.”* A rock and a fortress are inanimate things. They are places to shelter that are bigger and stronger than the person hiding in them, and they keep the enemy at bay. A deliverer is something more. A deliverer suggests a rescue mission: an active force that is stronger than the fugitive, and comes to rescue him by fighting on his behalf. This is a great picture of the defence that Christ is to us. He is the refuge that we need to shelter in when we are in danger of being overwhelmed. He is the one that is a formidable rock and an impenetrable fortress that the enemy of our souls cannot break through. But if He was only that we might have to live our lives as recluses; permanently shut in and under siege from the enemy. Thank God that Christ is also our deliverer. He promises to take the fight to our enemy and drive him away, so that we might live in peace again. Notice too, that there are suggestions that David becomes an active combatant in this battle. *“The God of my strength, in whom I will trust; my shield and the horn of my salvation”* (2 Samuel 22:2). God gives strength to David and acts as his shield. ‘The horn of my salvation’ implies strength and power for the fight. In short, once David is safely inside the fortress he is picked up, strengthened, re-equipped for the fight, and prepared for battle again. This is the same pattern that we should follow.

When we are completely overwhelmed we can turn to God as our defender and keeper and He will be the refuge we

need, but we are not meant to remain cowering for the long term. Christ picks us up, puts the sword and shield back in our hands, and gets us ready to go back out into the battle again.

What kind of storms can we expect to be sheltered from? We will briefly consider physical, mental and spiritual security.

### Physical Security

Clearly David's difficulties had a very significant physical element. His enemies were ordinary human beings who were trying to kill him! When he says, in 2 Samuel 22:3, "*You save me from violence*" I think the violence is quite literal. David did experience real and frequent physical deliverance. Perhaps we have had our own experiences where God has intervened in some way and physically delivered us. We can thank Him for these things and learn to trust Him by them, but God does not promise to deliver us from every physical threat or problem. We should certainly cry out to God in our difficulties, but we must not expect immediate, supernatural intervention, or be discouraged if it does not come. Don't forget that David is thanking God after the event for deliverance in the past. Sometimes, during the difficulty David despaired of ever being delivered. If you are in the middle of physical storms, keep praying, keep trusting and keep waiting on God.

### Mental or Emotional Security

Often our physical battles are intertwined with mental battles. Prolonged physical struggles can leave us mentally and emotionally drained. At other times the process can be reversed, and it is mental or emotional turmoil that seems to sap our physical energies as well.

Does God make provision for these kinds of storms? Let's read the next section of David's song of deliverance: "*When the waves of death surrounded me, the floods of ungodliness made me afraid. The sorrows of Sheol surrounded me; the snares of death confronted me. In my distress I called upon the LORD, and cried out to my God; He heard my voice from His temple, and my cry entered His ears.*" (2 Samuel 22:5-7)

Does any of that strike a chord with you? Waves, floods, sorrows, snares and distress: that sounds like a man in turmoil and struggling to know where to turn. If this represents David's mental turmoil, he responded in the same way, "*I called upon the LORD*" (2 Samuel 22:4). What a lovely way David has of describing how God heard. He heard David's voice from the temple and David's cry entered His ears! The temple represented God dwelling amongst His people. It was the sign of God claiming the nation as His own and the place of God's presence. That was where God heard David. When you cry to God in your distress, the God who now dwells in the hearts of His own, hears and responds. Our cries, that we may feel are falling on deaf ears, enter the ears of God. David then goes on to describe, in grand and graphical metaphors, what happens when God starts to respond to His servants cries. We don't have time to read the passage, but if you are feeling discouraged, pick up your Bible after this talk and read 2 Samuel 22:8-20, and see for yourself how God responds to prayers of distress!

### Spiritual Security

Some days, life feels like a battlefield. Problems at work, arguments with the kids, financial struggles, difficulties at church: everything seems to conspire to wear us down. Some of that may just be the stresses of 21st century living, but Satan, the enemy of our souls, knows how to use every device to try and defeat us. The Bible full of references to life as warfare. We are all caught up in a full scale, ongoing spiritual war.

Satan is totally committed in his battle against God, and he has no qualms about including God's children in his attacks. If you are determined to make your life count for Christ, and be faithful in serving Him in this world, then Satan is certain to include you in his list of targets. Satan is very skilful at exploiting our individual weaknesses. With some he might concentrate on discouragement through difficulties and opposition. With others he might feed a tendency to pride or greed. Be alert for those times when you are feeling particularly discouraged, lethargic or over confident. Those are the times to consider whether there is more going on than life's normal ups and downs, and to be ready to watch and pray. In fact watching and praying is **always** a good thing to do.

*Prayer:*

*Lord, thank You for the refuge that You give to us in fellowship and as our keeper. Teach us to run to You in our troubles and then stand for You in the fight. Amen.*

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