



“Just Outside”

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I'm glad to be with you for a while today to study the word of God. In **II Samuel 3** is one of the more sad and tragic stories of the Bible. It records the death of a man who did not have to die. In fact, he was only a few footsteps away from being in a place that would've saved his life. But it mattered not whether he was a hundred feet or a hundred miles from that place; he was outside where he needed to be. The fact that he was so close only makes it a greater tragedy.

Abner was a military commander and prominent figure in the early monarchies of Israel, particularly during the reign of Saul. But Abner got into trouble. He killed Asahel, the brother of another great man of war, Joab. In the course of time, Joab was determined to settle the score with Abner. Joab called Abner outside of the gates of the city of Hebron one day and killed him in revenge for what he had done to his brother.

II Samuel 3:26-27 “And when Joab was come out from David, he sent messengers after Abner, which brought him again from the well of Sirah: but David knew it not. And when Abner was returned to Hebron, Joab took him aside in the gate to speak with him quietly, and smote him there under the fifth rib, that he died, for the blood of Asahel his brother.”

Joab was able to murder Abner by luring him just outside of the city. Just outside the gate, the dastardly deed was committed. Abner is a picture of many today who are in great danger spiritually but don't realize it because they are just outside where they need to be. Could that be where you're standing today? In this study, we'll talk about how many people are deceived and are unknowingly and unnecessarily imperiling their souls.

Abner is a key figure in Israel during the time described in **I & II Samuel**. He was a cousin of King Saul and became the commander of Saul's army. He served quite effectively under Saul and was respected by the king and was given a high place of honor in the kingdom. In one of his battles, he killed a man named

Asahel and the victim's brother, Joab, sought revenge against him. You may remember that Joab was David's military leader.

Well, in the course of time, Saul died. Eventually, David became the king over all Israel. Abner at first worked against David but later defected and became loyal to the new king. David forgave him and perhaps all would've been well except that Joab was not going to let Abner off the hook so easily. He was still angry with Abner for killing his brother and he vowed revenge.

Back in that day, God designated certain cities as *cities of refuge*. They were sanctuary cities, where one who took another's life under such circumstances as that of Abner could find protection from an avenger. The enemy could not harm the person if they went to one of these six cities of refuge so long as they remained inside its gates. One step that separated being inside or outside the gates could make all the difference of whether a person lived or died.

Hebron was one of these cities of refuge, and Abner was inside that city. He was safe from his enemy. But Joab tricked him into stepping outside of the city. Joab claimed that he wanted to work out a deal or truce between he and Abner and he called to Abner to step outside and discuss the matter. There, right at the gate of Hebron, the Bible says that Joab took out his knife and stabbed Abner under the fifth rib until he died. Thus, Joab avenged the blood of his brother. One step inside the gate and Abner would've lived. Isn't that sad?

David was upset over Abner's death because he had forgiven Abner. Joab was pursuing his own agenda over that of the king. David attended Abner's funeral but his reaction to Abner's death is quite interesting. As upset as he was at Joab for doing this, the Bible says that David remarked about the manner of Abner's death and how unnecessary it was.

II Samuel 3:32-33 "And they buried Abner in Hebron: and the king lifted up his voice, and wept at the grave of Abner; and all the people wept. And the king lamented over Abner, and said, Died Abner as a fool dieth?"

Here is the king mourning his forgiven friend, but he says he died as a fool. He died as a fool because he stepped outside the place of safety. He was so very near the place that could've saved his life, but he listened to Joab and allowed himself to be drawn outside of the city by his enemy and he ended up losing his life.

Those cities of refuge established in Israel were *types* or *shadows* of Christ and His church. We're told that *the wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23)*, but Jesus is a city of refuge for the sinner who comes to Him in faith and obedience. The **Hebrew** writer speaks of the hope and comfort that is in Christ:

Hebrews 6:18 "That by two immutable things, in which it was impossible for God to lie, we might have a strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us:"

The Greek verb that is translated *fled for refuge* is the exact word that is used in the Greek Septuagint in **Numbers 35** to describe these six ancient cities of refuge. So, the **Hebrew** writer is saying that Christ and His church are to us what those cities were to those people back then. When we come to Christ, we are forgiven of our sins and we're added to His church. We come into a place of safety. We come into His body which is a place of salvation through Christ.

Acts 2:47 “...And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.”

Ephesians 5:23 “...Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body.”

Well, if Christ is the *saviour of the body* and the saved are *added to the church*, what should we say about those who are not part of the church? If being in Christ includes being in His body, then being outside of His body means being outside of Him. Christ is our refuge and they who make up His church are dwelling in God’s city of refuge. Wouldn’t it be a tragedy for some to step outside? To be so very close to spiritual safety and salvation, yet be outside? That’s exactly where many are today. They’re like Abner and perhaps others of that ancient time who are just outside the gate. As we learn from this tragic story, close is not enough. Standing just outside is just as dangerous as standing far away.

Let’s look at some people who are standing just outside the city of refuge today. They’re almost in, but they’re still in a dangerous and lost condition, like the scribe to whom Jesus said long ago, *Thou art not far from the kingdom of God (Mark 12:34)*. But, you see, not far is not near enough. The only place where safety and salvation are found is inside—not near or close by, but inside.

First of all, the moral person often finds himself standing just outside the city of refuge. Moral from the standpoint that they live according to a high moral and ethical standard. The world perhaps looks at them as good and acceptable people. They live relatively clean lives. They are honest with others, they keep their word, they pay their bills. They’re good neighbors, they’re giving, charitable, kind, compassionate. They certainly seek to do no harm against others. They’re the kind of people you want living next door. The question is, where do such people stand in relation to Christ and the church? Often, unfortunately, they stand just outside. They’re in a dangerous place because they’re living under the deception that they’re close enough to reap the benefits of the city of refuge.

Perhaps you believe that you’re in a good relationship with God because you live an upright and moral life, or because your life is characterized by giving and good deeds. You may think, *well, I’m not a member of the church. I’m not into all of that, but I live a good life, so I think I’m alright*. But in **Acts 10**, we read of a man who could be described as that very type of person.

Acts 10:1-2 “There was a certain man in Caesarea called Cornelius, a centurion of the band called the Italian band, A devout man, and one that feared God with all his house, which gave much alms to the people, and prayed to God always.”

Cornelius was an unusual man in his time. He was a Gentile and the Gentiles of Jesus’ day were not well thought of by God’s people. Gentiles were associated with idolatry and godless immorality, and for good reason. **Romans 1** tells us why that is. But Cornelius was different. He was a devout man who even feared God and taught his family to do the same. The Bible says that he prayed to God and gave much alms to the people, meaning he was generous in helping those in need. Cornelius is what was called a *Gentile of the gate*, which described a Gentile who was uncircumcised and therefore unconverted to the Jewish religion or covenant, BUT who believed in the God of the Jews and renounced the polytheism of idolatry and accepted the one, true God of the Jews, and who tried to live a godly life like the Jews supposedly lived, without actually becoming a convert to the Jewish religion.

Cornelius was like many today who claim that they live commendable and moral lives but they’re not in the church of the Lord. The difference is that Cornelius was headed in the right direction. He was looking and searching for what was right. He was seemingly unsatisfied with his efforts and was looking for light, for some revelation of God, for more knowledge of the God that he was trying to serve and please. God

responded to his searching by sending the apostle Peter to his house in Caesarea. The angel of God told Cornelius, *he shall tell thee what thou oughtest to do (Acts 10:6)*. In the next chapter, Peter recalls that God told Cornelius that when Peter came, he would tell him *words, whereby thou and all thy house shall be saved (Acts 11:14)*.

What does that tell us? Doesn't it tell us that despite his morals, good intentions, his motives, generosity, and charity that Cornelius was still lost? You see, he couldn't be saved without obeying the gospel of Christ and coming into the church. Friend, neither can you. You may live a morally upright life. You may even have good thoughts about God. You might have good motives and good intentions, but that's not enough. It's a shame that a person like that remains outside the kingdom and will be lost. Because morals won't save you.

Are God's people to be moral people? Absolutely, but morals in and of themselves won't save you. Cornelius would've been lost had he not heard, believed, and obeyed the gospel in baptism. You see, you must be inside the gate of mercy—not near it. You must be inside the city of refuge, inside of Christ and His church to be safe from the enemy. Just outside won't do.

Wouldn't we love to have churches filled with people like Cornelius? Of course, we would and we should. We should all be living the kind of life that Cornelius was trying to live. He excels far beyond the character and works of many professing Christians that we see today. You may be living such a life, but don't be deceived into thinking that that's enough. You've got to be in Christ, in the church of Christ.

Galatians 3:27 "For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ."
I Corinthians 12:13 "For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body..."

Are you inside, or are you like Abner and standing just outside the gate, relying on your morals and intentions and inherent goodness as you perceive it to be? You are standing just outside and in reality, that's a long way away.

Standing outside with the moral person is many a religious person. People whose lives are filled with religious activity, but in reality though they are in some respects close, they are still outside as well. Friend, it's not only possible to be religious and lost, but Jesus once said that the majority will be in that very condition in the Day of Judgment. Didn't the Savior end His sermon on the mount with that startling warning?

Matthew 7:21 "Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven."

Who says, *Lord, Lord*? Religious people. Jesus isn't talking about atheists or unbelieving Jews; He's talking about those who would profess to know Him.

Matthew 7:22 "Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works?"

We see here that some DO the will of God and others DON'T DO the will of God.

Matthew 7:23 "And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity."

Those will be chilling words to hear in the Day of Judgment, especially to people who thought they knew Christ. People who were religious, but they weren't doing the will of God. They are lost. Friend, those are devout and zealous religious people whom Jesus says are going to be condemned in the Day of Judgment. Why? Because they didn't do His will. They didn't seek God after the due order. Perhaps they were faithful to worship, but not faithful to the teachings of God's word. That's going to be an awful, awful tragedy that not a few, but Jesus says in fact, *many* religious people are going to face. There are many—we might even say most—religious people who are worshipping God in vain, teaching and practicing the doctrines of men and things unauthorized by the scripture, who believe at the same time that they are saved. They are near but are yet so very far.

There was a man in **Acts 8** who was devoutly religious yet lost. He lived in Ethiopia. He was a government official from that country, and he travelled hundreds and hundreds of miles by chariot from Africa to Judea and the city of Jerusalem to worship God. He was even reading the scriptures as he travelled. You know, there aren't many people in the world today who would go to such lengths to worship God in some far away place with other people. Many religious people today won't even faithfully attend worship in their own neighborhood. But here was a man who was devout and zealous enough to make such a journey. But that wasn't enough. He was near, but still outside. How do we know that? Because he had never truly heard and obeyed the gospel. He had never come to know of Christ nor been immersed into Christ. The Bible pictures it as an urgent matter. When the preacher, Philip, got down to that desert road where this Ethiopian treasurer was riding and he preached Christ to him right there in the chariot, this man came to see the error in the things that he had believed and the way he had been worshipping and serving God, and it was so urgent that he immediately confessed his faith in Jesus Christ. That very moment, he ordered the chariot to stop right there along the road where he could be baptized in a pool of water that was there. That's how urgent and critical of a matter this was. He may have been religious, but he came to realize that he was still lost and he wanted to obey the gospel and be saved.

You see, being zealous and sincere and orthodox to some system of teaching does not replace true obedience to what the word of God says. What you need to do is translate the kind of zeal that you have for the things and doctrines of men into a zeal for the things and doctrines of Christ. You need to translate that kind of dedication to the truth and not to error because you can't be saved in error. You may be sincerely and devoutly religious, but I would ask you today, is your church the one you read about in the Bible? Were you ever baptized for the remission of your sins? Or are you just outside? Quickly, the procrastinator also stands outside with the moral person and the religious person. This is the person who knows what he should do. He has heard the gospel and doesn't necessarily argue with it. He may even claim to believe it. But, for whatever reason, he has never stepped inside the kingdom, lingering outside, procrastinating. These are people who stand outside with good intentions to one day enter the city of refuge, but just like Joab did, the devil has lured them away and keeps them just outside.

I want to remind you of that strange and shocking eulogy that David spoke over Abner. He asked, "*Died Abner as a fool dieth?*" You see, he died because he was foolish enough to be outside the city where he knew he should be. I want to stress to you today that if a man is outside the church of the Lord Jesus Christ, he is lost and it's as simple as that. It doesn't matter how you feel about it or what you want to think about it. It doesn't matter how near you may be. If a man is outside Christ and outside the church of the Lord Jesus Christ, he is in a lost condition.

Friend, if you are outside of the church today, you're lost. It matters not how good you claim to be or how many commendable things you might claim to do or believe. You are lost. And that's a greater tragedy than those who live far, far away from the city of God. If you die in your sins, you will die as a fool. So near, yet too far. If the truth were told at many funerals today, the preachers would have to say about the deceased, *A fool has just died. He was so close! He had every opportunity to be saved but he never obeyed the gospel.*

Don't die like Abner. Don't leave the world just a step away from the city of refuge. Maybe you just need to complete your obedience in baptism today. Maybe you believe that Jesus is the Son of God. Maybe you really do want to please God. You want to live for the Lord and do what you know to be right. But you've never responded in scriptural baptism for the remission of sins. Do that today. Resolve to begin serving God alongside others in His church. Enter the city of refuge today. Or maybe you're a member of the church who has left. You've fallen into the sinister snare of Joab and stepped away. You are outside and you will be lost. The past won't redeem you. You need to step inside the gate where there is safety and salvation in Jesus and His church. And you need to do it today.

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