



## Joshua - Chapter Twenty

### III Joshua 13:1-21:45 - Dividing the Land (continues)

#### Summary of Chapter Twenty

As instructed by God, six cities of refuge are established west of Jordan. The purpose of these cities was to provide refuge for someone who had killed another accidentally and was being pursued the avenger of blood, a close relative of the deceased who is seeking retribution against the slayer.

#### III.c Joshua 20:1-21:45 - A land of justice and worship

The designation of six cities of refuge in Chapter 20 and forty eight Levitical cities (21:1-42) demonstrates the Lord's concern that the land not only be duly allocated as an inheritance for the tribes but that it be a land where justice prevails and true worship is cultivated. The section ends with yet another proclamation that the Lord has fulfilled all the good promises he made to the house of Israel.

#### III.c.i Joshua 20:1-9 - The Cities of Refuge

Refer to the chapter summary above.

<sup>1</sup> Then the Lord spoke to Joshua, saying, <sup>2</sup> 'Say to the Israelites, "Appoint the cities of refuge, of which I spoke to you through Moses, <sup>3</sup> so that anyone who kills a person without intent or by mistake may flee there; they shall be for you a refuge from the avenger of blood.

#### Joshua 20:1-3

The fullest description of how the cities of refuge are to function appears in Numbers 35:6-34, where the Lord expands on his initial instructions to Moses in Exodus 21:12-14. They are to be six in number, chosen among the Levitical cities,

with three on each side of the Jordan (Numbers 35:13-14). They are to guarantee judicial due process for anyone in Israel, including the resident or transient alien.

In Deuteronomy 4:41-43 Moses designates by name the three cities of refuge in the newly conquered territory east of the Jordan, one each in the territories of Reuben, Gad, and eastern Manasseh. Later, in Deuteronomy 19:1-10, he charges Israel regarding the cities to be designated west of the Jordan, although he does not name them, as the land is yet to be conquered. They are to be appropriately spaced, so that the fugitive can reach the nearest one before being overtaken by the avenger. Should God enlarge Israel's territory, an additional three cities can be designated (Deuteronomy 19:8-9). That the additional three are not mentioned in Joshua may hint at the fact that Israel was not entirely successful in taking over all the land. The three cities west of the Jordan are finally named in v.7. This overall progression is in keeping with the geographical movements of Israel and the extent of the conquest at each stage.

So that anyone who kills a person without intent or by mistake may flee there. A slayer was one who unintentionally or without premeditation took another's life. Therefore the purpose of the city was to protect someone who may be entirely innocent or guilty of manslaughter but not of murder.

The kinsman-redeemer, Hebrew *go'el*, was typically the nearest male relative, responsible to protect the family's lives, liberty, property, and so forth: *<<If anyone of your kin falls into difficulty and sells a piece of property, then the next-of-kin shall come and redeem what the relative has sold>>* (Leviticus 25:25). Where a life was taken, the kinsman-redeemer became the avenger of blood, held responsible in cases of murder to ensure justice is carried out: *<<The avenger of blood is the one who shall put the murderer to death; when they meet, the avenger of blood shall execute the sentence>>* (Numbers 35:19). In distinction from some of its ancient Near Eastern neighbours, Israel was to *<<accept no ransom for the life of the murderer>>* (Numbers 35:31), for the Lord desired justice in respect to both guilt and innocence: *<<One who justifies the wicked and one who condemns the righteous are both alike an abomination to the Lord>>* (Proverbs 17:15).

God had a passion to ensure that murderers were punished in ancient Israel, and in that culture, the final responsibility for justice rested with the designated *goel*, i.e. the avenger of blood in the family. The principle for capital punishment goes back to: *<<Whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person's blood be shed; for in his own image God made humankind>>* Genesis 9:6. The state's right to use the sword of execution is also stated in the NT: *<<For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval; for it is God's servant for your good. But if you*

*do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer>> (Romans 13:3-4). God said also that unpunished murderers defiled the land: <<Moreover, you shall accept no ransom for the life of a murderer who is subject to the death penalty; a murderer must be put to death. Nor shall you accept ransom for one who has fled to a city of refuge, enabling the fugitive to return to live in the land before the death of the high priest. You shall not pollute the land in which you live; for blood pollutes the land, and no expiation can be made for the land, for the blood that is shed in it, except by the blood of the one who shed it. You shall not defile the land in which you live, in which I also dwell; for I the Lord dwell among the Israelites>> (Numbers 35:31-34).*

<sup>4</sup> The slayer shall flee to one of these cities and shall stand at the entrance of the gate of the city, and explain the case to the elders of that city; then the fugitive shall be taken into the city, and given a place, and shall remain with them.

#### Joshua 20:4

The slayer shall explain the case to the elders of that city. According to custom, the elders of the city spent much time at the gates of the city. When someone fleeing from an avenger of blood came to a city of refuge, he stated his case to the elders at the city gates.

The fugitive shall be taken into the city, and given a place, and shall remain with them. After explaining the case, the fleeing person could expect to find protection within the walls of the city of refuge, although they would have to stay there, and live in the city, to enjoy that protection.

<sup>5</sup> And if the avenger of blood is in pursuit, they shall not give up the slayer, because the neighbour was killed by mistake, there having been no enmity between them before.

#### Joshua 20:5

They shall not give up the slayer. The leaders of a city of refuge were obliged to protect the one who had fled to the city. The avenger of blood had no legal standing to deliver the slayer over for execution.

Because the neighbour was killed by mistake, there having been no enmity between them before. Israel had a sophisticated legal system, with judgements often based on intent and premeditation.

<sup>6</sup> The slayer shall remain in that city until there is a trial before the congregation, until the death of the one who is high priest at the time: then the slayer may return home, to the town in which the deed was done.”

#### Joshua 20:6

The slayer shall remain in that city until there is a trial before the congregation, until the death of the one who is high priest at the time. To be protected against the avenger of blood, the slayer had to stay within the walls of the city of refuge until their case was fully heard by the proper authorities, and until the death of the standing high priest. This verse compresses the fuller instructions provided in Numbers Chapter 35.

Then the slayer may return home, to the town in which the deed was done. After being declared innocent of murder by the proper authorities, and after the death of the standing high priest, the slayer could go back to his home and be protected against the wrath of the avenger of blood.

<sup>7</sup> So they set apart Kedesh in Galilee in the hill country of Naphtali, and Shechem in the hill country of Ephraim, and Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron) in the hill country of Judah. <sup>8</sup> And beyond the Jordan east of Jericho, they appointed Bezer in the wilderness on the tableland, from the tribe of Reuben, and Ramoth in Gilead, from the tribe of Gad, and Golan in Bashan, from the tribe of Manasseh. <sup>9</sup> These were the cities designated for all the Israelites, and for the aliens residing among them, that anyone who killed a person without intent could flee there, so as not to die by the hand of the avenger of blood, until there was a trial before the congregation.

#### Joshua 20:7-9

The map shows that the cities were distributed fairly evenly around the country so that any citizen living in the land would have a good opportunity of reaching one of the cities before being caught by the avenger of blood.

Deuteronomy 19:2 states that proper roads were to be built and maintained to these cities of refuge. The city was not much good to the slayer if they could not get to it quickly.



Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron) in the hill country of Judah was the region given to Caleb and his family for their faithful service and the likely place for the birth of John the Baptist: <<*At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth*>> (Luke 1:39-40 NIV).

These were the cities designated for all the Israelites, and for the aliens residing among them. The cities of refuge were not only for the benefit of the Israelite, but also for the foreigners among them. God's justice applied to all without partiality.

The Bible applies this picture of the city of refuge to the believer finding refuge in God on more than one occasion: <<*God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble*>> (Psalm 46:1), and: <<*In the same way, when God desired to show even more clearly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it by an oath, so that through two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible that God would prove false, we who have taken refuge might be strongly encouraged to seize the hope set before us*>> (Hebrews 6:17-18).

Points of similarity between the cities of refuge and refuge in Jesus are that both Jesus and the cities of refuge:

- Are within easy reach of the needy person; they were of no use unless someone could get to the place of refuge.
- Are open to all, not just the Israelite; no one needs to fear that they would be turned away from their place of refuge in their time of need.
- Became a place where the one in need would live; you did not come to a city of refuge in time of need just to look around.
- Are the only alternative for the one in need; without this specific protection, they will be destroyed.
- Provide protection only within their boundaries; to go outside means death.

Full freedom comes with the death of the High Priest. A crucial distinction between the cities of refuge and refuge in Jesus is that the cities of refuge only helped the innocent, but the guilty can come to Jesus and still find refuge.