

Joshua 20
May 2, 2019

Title: Six Cities of Refuge

Introduction

I'd like to welcome you back to our Joshua Bible Study this morning. Our passage today is found in Joshua 20, verses 1 through 9. Let's pray.

As we open up our time of study this morning, I'd like to read these verses together. I'll read aloud and you can follow along with me.

Joshua 20:1-9

"Then the Lord spoke to Joshua, saying,

2 "Speak to the sons of Israel, saying, 'Designate the cities of refuge, of which I spoke to you through Moses,

3 that the manslayer who kills any person unintentionally, without premeditation, may flee there, and they shall become your refuge from the avenger of blood.

4 He shall flee to one of these cities, and shall stand at the entrance of the gate of the city and state his case in the hearing of the elders of that city; and they shall take him into the city to them and give him a place, so that he may dwell among them.

5 Now if the avenger of blood pursues him, then they shall not deliver the manslayer into his hand, because he struck his neighbor without premeditation and did not hate him beforehand.

6 He shall dwell in that city until he stands before the congregation for judgment, until the death of the one who is high priest in those days.

Then the manslayer shall return to his own city and to his own house, to the city from which he fled.'"

7 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.

8 Beyond the Jordan east of Jericho, they designated Bezer in the wilderness on the plain from the tribe of Reuben, and Ramoth in Gilead from the tribe of Gad, and Golan in Bashan from the tribe of Manasseh.

9 These were the appointed cities for all the sons of Israel and for the stranger who sojourns among them, that whoever kills any person unintentionally may flee there,

and not die by the hand of the avenger of blood until he stands before the congregation.”

Part I

So as we look at these 9 verses together, in chapter 20 of the book of Joshua, we read that the Lord asks Joshua to establish cities of refuge for anyone who has accidentally or unintentionally killed another person. As we look at the various verses set within this passage, we’re going to be amazed at the spiritual significance of these seemingly straightforward scriptures.

Let’s read verses 1 through 3 again.

“Then the Lord spoke to Joshua, saying,
2 “Speak to the sons of Israel, saying, ‘Designate the cities of refuge, of which I spoke to you through Moses,
3 that the manslayer who kills any person unintentionally, without premeditation, may flee there, and they shall become your refuge from the avenger of blood.’”

If we look back at the beginning of the Old Testament in Genesis 9:6, we read that God establishes a covenant with Noah and his descendants regarding all of creation.

Genesis 9:6 reads,
 “Whoever sheds man’s blood,
 By man his blood shall be shed,
 For in the image of God
 He made man.”

God gives to Noah and his sons the world, which contains all of creation. And He provides lots of living things for food. Yet, in verse 6 God uses a very specific and serious tone.

Here he talks about the cost of taking another person’s life. He states in this verse that whoever sheds another man’s blood, a man who is made in the image of God, will himself die as the penalty for his crime. There is strict punishment for this sin as instituted by the Lord Himself.

Here we read that God considers murder to be a serious act. It is not to be taken casually. And He states that murder is actually committed against Himself, man's Creator.

In Exodus 20, the Ten Commandments are listed. Specifically, in verse 13 the Lord says the following: "You shall not murder."

There are many words in Hebrew for the act of killing.

The Hebrew word listed in this verse is "ratsach" (rott SAK') which is a verb. It means to dash in pieces, or kill a human being. It means to murder or put to death, slay, or assassinate another person.

Exodus 21:12 says,
"He who strikes a man so that he dies shall surely be put to death."

So the Mosaic Law states that if a man commits premeditated murder, he has to forfeit his own life as a penalty for his crime. Today we'd call such an act "first-degree murder."

For those who commit premeditated murder, as outlined in the Old Testament, the penalty is death.

According to the Lord, who we know is a God of justice, He makes a clear distinction between premeditated murder and unintentional murder.

When someone accidentally or unintentionally takes another life, it is called "manslaughter." And it does not warrant the same penalty.

Instead of being killed by the avenger of blood, someone who commits manslaughter must immediately leave his home and community and flee to another city. He must become a refugee in a city of refuge – which is kind of a mixed bag. Yes. His life is spared, yet for all intents and purposes, he is no longer free. He must give up the freedom and homeland he once knew in exchange for keeping his life.

As always, it depends upon the condition and motivation of the heart.

I love in 1 Samuel 16:7 where it says,

“But the LORD said to Samuel, “... for God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.”

God, who knows every man’s heart, also knows that sometimes accidents happen.

So as a means of providing a way out of a tragic situation, the Lord tells Joshua to provide several cities so that anyone who finds himself in this predicament may flee to a local safe zone and live there for an extended amount of time.

The Lord is also aware of what oftentimes happens to family members when they suddenly hear the bad news of a family member’s death. They often want to seek revenge. People react in anger or become inconsolable or overreact and want to literally get their hands on the guy who killed their loved one!

And in doing so, this family member takes matters into his own hands and lashes out at the man who committed manslaughter. He just wants the person who accidentally killed his brother or father or other relative to die and to die immediately!

So as we look at verses 1 through 3 together, it is clear what the Lord wants Joshua to do.

The Lord says that Joshua is to designate a city of refuge, so that for the manslayer, this city literally and figuratively become a person’s refuge from the avenger of blood.

So what is the Lord exactly saying in these few verses? Let’s take a look together.

First, let’s turn to another book in the Old Testament that precedes the book of Joshua.

Turn with me if you will to Numbers, Chapter 35. In this chapter, the Lord specifies two (2) things. First, He speaks to Moses regarding the cities of the Levites. Second, He discusses specifically how the cities of refuge are to be established.

Beginning in verse 9 of Numbers Chapter 35, and continuing on through verse 15, it says,

⁹ Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying,

¹⁰ “Speak to the sons of Israel and say to them, ‘When you cross the Jordan into the land of Canaan,

¹¹ then you shall select for yourselves cities to be your cities of refuge, that the manslayer who has killed any person unintentionally may flee there.

¹² The cities shall be to you as a refuge from the avenger, so that the manslayer will not die until he stands before the congregation for trial.

¹³ The cities which you are to give shall be your six cities of refuge.

¹⁴ You shall give three cities across the Jordan and three cities in the land of Canaan; they are to be cities of refuge.

¹⁵ These six cities shall be for refuge for the sons of Israel, and for the alien and for the sojourner among them; that anyone who kills a person unintentionally may flee there."

So here the Lord is speaking to Moses with regard to what needed to be done in terms of preparing six (6) specified cities in the Promised Land. These cities would be designated as "protective safe zones" for anyone who accidentally kills another person and finds himself in need of a refuge.

So that's what the Lord discusses in the book of Numbers. Now let's go back to Joshua, Chapter 20.

The word "avenger" is also mentioned in the first three verses.

We know that these cities are set up for a man who accidentally kills someone and then needs to flee immediately so that an "avenger of blood" or "angry vengeance taker" isn't able to meet up and kill the accused who is literally fleeing for his life.

So the question we have in our minds is the following. Who is the avenger and what role does he have during this time period?

We can begin to understand the role of an avenger when we look at the role of a Goel in the Old Testament. It is related to the word "kinsman" and "redeemer" or "avenger."

The "Kinsman-Redeemer" is the male relative who, according to various laws found in the Old Testament, has the privilege or responsibility to act for a family member who is in trouble, in danger, or in need of vindication.

This Hebrew term describes a male relative who has the following duties:
(Listen as I read some of the Kinsman-Redeemer's duties and see if you can think of anyone you know who may also provide the same duties ! 😊)

1. He delivers or rescues (Exodus 6:6)
2. He redeems property (Leviticus 27:9-25) or a person (Leviticus 25:47-55)
3. He avenges the murder of a relative as a "guiltless executioner" (Num 35:9-34)
4. He receives restitution for wrong done to a relative who has since died (Num 5:8)

This kinsman-redeemer has a unique role. He can redeem or save or vindicate depending upon the need of his relative.

Many of us know the story of Ruth, where Boaz enters the scene as a Kinsman-Redeemer.

Ruth 2:1 says,

"Now Naomi had a kinsman of her husband, a man of great wealth, of the family of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz."

Ruth 4:14 says,

"Then the women said to Naomi, 'Blessed is the Lord who has not left you without a redeemer today, and may his name become famous in Israel.'"

In various passages of the Old Testament we read that God is a Kinsman to Israel.

Exodus 4:22-23 says that He is Israel's Creator and Father.

"Then you shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says the LORD, "Israel is My son, My firstborn.

So I said to you, 'Let My son go that he may serve Me'; but you have refused to let him go. Behold, I will kill your son, your firstborn.'"

Exodus 20:2 says that God is Israel's Deliverer.

"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery."

Leviticus 25:23 says that God is the Owner of the land.

"The land, moreover, shall not be sold permanently, for the land is Mine; for you are but aliens and sojourners with Me."

Deuteronomy 19:10 says that God is the One who hears innocent blood crying out for vengeance.

¹⁰ So innocent blood will not be shed in the midst of your land which the LORD your God gives you as an inheritance, and blood guiltiness be on you." (Deut 19:10 ; 21:6-9)

Exodus 6:2-5 says that God is the King who has made his covenant with the people.

² God spoke further to Moses and said to him, "I am the LORD;

³ and I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as God Almighty, but by My name, LORD, I did not make Myself known to them.

⁴ I also established My covenant with them, to give them the land of Canaan, the land in which they sojourned.

⁵ Furthermore I have heard the groaning of the sons of Israel, because the Egyptians are holding them in bondage, and I have remembered My covenant."

God is Israel's Redeemer, the One who will defend and vindicate each of His people.

So now as we turn our attention back to verse 3 in Joshua 20, the Lord sets up these cities of refuge so that the accused may be protected from the avenger of blood, from the victim's Kinsman-Redeemer.

The next word we want to look at in this text is the word "flee." In verse 3, we read "that the manslayer who kills any person unintentionally, without premeditation, may flee there, ..."

The word "flee" is defined as running away from danger or evil; to hurry toward a place of security, or to run away swiftly. So in the context of this situation, we understand that the person who is accused of unintentional murder is going to flee the area as quickly as possible and is going to flee to one of these cities of refuge as if his life depended upon/on it – which it in fact does!

Let's now turn to the next three (3) verses in our text. Let's look at verses 4 through 6.

⁴ He shall flee to one of these cities, and shall stand at the entrance of the gate of the city and state his case in the hearing of the elders of that city; and they shall take him into the city to them and give him a place, so that he may dwell among them.

5 Now if the avenger of blood pursues him, then they shall not deliver the manslayer into his hand, because he struck his neighbor without premeditation and did not hate him beforehand.

6 He shall dwell in that city until he stands before the congregation for judgment, until the death of the one who is high priest in those days. Then the manslayer shall return to his own city and to his own house, to the city from which he fled.”

Here we want to talk about the accused man’s journey from his home city unto his adopted city, a fairly close city of refuge.

In terms of location, these six (6) cities are situated throughout the region of Canaan and are set up with specific parameters.

First, three (3) of the cities are situated in the west and three (3) are east of the Jordan River. And these cities are selected because they are Levite cities.

And none of these locations pose a problem in terms of having to go a long distance to get there. They are strategically placed throughout the region so that men can easily flee there within a short period of time.

I did a little research on the locations of these cities which are named in verses 7 and 8 and I learned some interesting facts.

First, each city is located in a hill area, which means that it is easily viewed from the lowlands.

Second, the road leading to each of the cities has to be very wide and cleared of any debris or rocks. There can be nothing on the road to block or hinder a man from getting to his destination quickly.

Third, there has to be large road signs at each of the crossroads so that it is clear to all where to go.

Next, there are to be bridges over all ravines, etc. so that the accused may promptly continue his journey as quickly as possible.

In addition, any person who is accused of manslaughter, whether Jew or Gentile, may seek refuge in any of these cities. Amazingly, the Lord does not show partiality with

regard to a person's background or religious affiliation. Anyone can show up at one of these cities and have entrée into this safe space.

That is reminiscent of the Gospel, isn't it?

Also, once the accused man entered the city, there would be plenty of food and other provisions for his physical needs. He simply had to get there. Once he was there, he was provided for in terms of daily food.

Verse 4 says that once the accused man arrives at the city gate, he is to tell the elders the details of his story. Essentially, he tells them anything they want to know in hopes of being able to stay within the city walls – away from the dead man's avenger, and away and protected from any real danger.

Once it is determined by the elders that he is not guilty of "premeditated murder"-- that an accident did in fact happen, he is told that he may enter the city gate and stay without any penalty or threat of retribution.

It is amazing that he is allowed to live amongst the other citizens, and may stay as a protected member of their city until the death of the High Priest.

In terms of the avenger, who most certainly is in hot pursuit of his new enemy, has probably arrived at the same city gate wanting to kill the accused as soon as he arrives. However, due to the law, he is unable to touch him.

Verse 5 specifies that even if the "avenger of blood" pursues the man, then they, (meaning, the townspeople and elders) shall not deliver the manslayer into the kinsman redeemer's hand. In essence, the avenger has to wait outside the city.

What is clear, however, is that if the manslayer or accused man ever steps out of the city, even 5 steps outside the gate, then the avenger has every right to kill the manslayer.

So the hard part about this scenario is two-fold. First, the man who accidentally killed another person has to leave his own town and flee to another town, a city of refuge. Not only does he have to leave his own family and friends quickly ... and maybe forever, depending upon when the High Priest dies, but he also may learn that the avenger is still after him.

That is, maybe he lives in the next city and on a daily basis just lies in wait at the gate

of the city taunting him, warning him not to set foot outside the gate, etc.

So the manslayer has to contend with many, many difficulties even though he is free to stay within the city of refuge walls.

We also know that the manslayer, the accused, had to quickly flee the scene of the accident. Because there were no police or other protective force during the time of Joshua, laws had to be enacted so that there would not be chaos in the streets. If a premeditated murder happened, it had to be dealt with swiftly. It meant only one thing. Death to the murderer.

Similarly, if an unintentional death happened, the Mosaic Law stated that the man who slayed another had to quickly flee the city and find a city of refuge if he wanted to live. Essentially, that meant leaving all of his family members and friends. And it probably meant not having any time to say goodbye.

The other difficulty is that he was constantly under the threat of death from the avenger. The Lord states in Numbers Chapter 35 the clear boundaries regarding what the avenger can and cannot do.

Numbers 35: 25-28

²⁵The congregation shall deliver the manslayer from the hand of the blood avenger, and the congregation shall restore him to his city of refuge to which he fled; and he shall live in it until the death of the high priest who was anointed with the holy oil.

²⁶ But if the manslayer at any time goes beyond the border of his city of refuge to which he may flee,

²⁷ and the blood avenger finds him outside the border of his city of refuge, and the blood avenger kills the manslayer, he will not be guilty of blood

²⁸ because he should have remained in his city of refuge until the death of the high priest. But after the death of the high priest the manslayer shall return to the land of his possession."

So even though the avenger of blood wants to exact vengeance on the accused, and may even want to lie in wait just outside the gate of the city of refuge, he is restrained by the law of the Lord. As the manslayer's enemy, he can only go so far in his pursuit of killing him. He literally cannot cross a line in going after the manslayer. If he does, he could lose his life.

The good news in Chapter 20 comes at the end of passage in verse 9.

“9 These were the appointed cities for all the sons of Israel and for the stranger who sojourns among them, that whoever kills any person unintentionally may flee there, and not die by the hand of the avenger of blood until he stands before the congregation.”

Not only does the Lord provide protection for the manslayer, He also provides shelter, food and forgiveness. In Numbers 35, the Lord instructs Moses regarding how long the manslayer must remain in the city of refuge. In verses 25 and 28, He specifies that he shall live in it until the death of the high priest. But the Lord adds, in verse 28, that the man is free to return to his home after the death of the high priest.

So we can imagine exactly what this man is going through. First he accidentally kills someone. Then he has to flee to a nearby hill city to save his life because he knows that a near relative of the victim is after him seeking vengeance. Then he makes his way to the city and approaches the gate.

At the gate a guard asks another guard to inform the elders of the city that someone who just committed manslaughter would like to plea his case and seek refuge in their city.

As all of the elders gather together at the entrance of the city, they ask him questions regarding what happened. Then they talk among themselves and determine that based upon the details of the accident that he did in fact commit manslaughter and as such is entitled to stay in their city as a refugee.

Next, the elders inform the guard at the gate that the man will be dwelling in their city for the time being. The elders also inform the man that he must dwell within the city walls only and never leave.

Otherwise, if he chooses to go outside the city limits, beyond the protection of the city walls, the avenger of blood would be able to kill him and they wouldn't be able to protect him.

The elders also inform him of very encouraging news as he enters the city of refuge. They tell him that he is welcome to stay in their city – protected, with provisions of food and shelter and other community members – as long as he needs to until one special day. And that day is significant because it is when the high priest dies.

Once the high priest is dead, the accused man is free to return to his home city where he will be reunited with his family and friends and his own community. No longer will he have to hide from his enemy in the city of refuge nor will he be separated from his loved ones.

Verse 6 states,

“He shall dwell in that city ... until the death of the one who is high priest in those days. Then the manslayer shall return to his own city and to his own house, to the city from which he fled.”

So as we look at this chapter, it is clear that we can see the Lord’s heart towards those who follow His ways.

First, we see His sense of justice. He is a just God.

Jeremiah 9:24 says,

“but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the LORD who exercises lovingkindness, justice and righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things,” declares the LORD.”

Isaiah 33:22

“For the LORD is our judge; the LORD is our lawgiver; the LORD is our king; he will save us.”

Next, we see that the Lord has great compassion. He is an understanding God.

Psalms 147:5

“Great is our Lord, and abundant in power; his understanding is beyond measure.”

We also know that the Lord is full of mercy. He is a merciful God.

Exodus 34:6

“The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, ...”

Hebrews 4:16

“Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”

God also always provides a way of escape. He delivers those who call on Him.

1 Corinthians 10:13

"No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it."

John 14:6

"Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.'"

He also offers protection for His sheep. He is a Refuge and Shield for all who put their trust in Him.

Proverbs 30:5 says,

"Every word of God proves true; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him."

Psalms 91:1-2 reads,

"He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High
Will abide in the shadow of the Almighty.

² I will say to the LORD, "My refuge and my fortress,
My God, in whom I trust!"

In addition, God pardons us for all of our sins. He is a forgiving God.

Psalms 32:5 states,

"I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD," and you forgave the iniquity of my sin."

Isaiah 43:25-26 says,

"I, I am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins. Put me in remembrance; let us argue together; set forth your case, that you may be proved right."

And finally, God allowed His Son to die on the cross for the sins of all. He is a loving God.

Isaiah 53:5 says,

"But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed."

1 John 2:2 is an amazing promise for us. It says,
"He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world."

Luke 22:20 says,
"In the same way, after the supper He took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is poured out for you."

Conclusion

As a way of finishing up our examination of these verses today, it's good to be reminded of the spiritual inheritance we have as believers in Jesus today.

First, we are blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, according to Chapter 1 in Ephesians.

Also, we know that Jesus chose us in Him before the foundation of the world.

Next, we are promised that He predestined us to adoption as sons and daughters through Jesus to Himself according to the kind intention of His will.

And finally, in Him, we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace which He lavished on us.

And our promises in Jesus go on and on throughout the books of the Bible.

That's what is so encouraging about studying the Bible. As we learn more about the Father, and His plan of refuge cities for anyone who becomes a manslayer, for example, we become in awe of His ability to be a refuge for us.

As a result of studying these verses today found in Chapter 20 of Joshua, our faith in the Lord is bolstered and our trust in Him is strengthened. We can look back at what happened during this time period and see God's guiding hand of mercy. He designates these cities as a way of demonstrating His heart of kindness and mercy.

As Psalm 46:1 says,
"God is our refuge and strength, and a very present help in times of trouble."

What a wonderful promise we have in this verse! Let's pray.

