

Courageous

Claiming Canaan, Lessons from the Book of Joshua

Lesson 17: Cities of Refuge (20:1-9)

Behind its walls, protection waited for all those who would inadvertently sin with their hands, but not with their hearts.ⁱ Its refuge was to be sought as if one's life depended upon it. They must remain there as if death waited outside its gates.

Inside the city of refuge, the condemned would find shelter and solace from the angry and assuming. They would find defense and mercy from the law which demanded "*an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth*" (Exodus 21:24, NKJV). And in time, the offender would find complete forgiveness and freedom from their sin.

Psalm 46:1-2a says, "*God is our refuge and strength; a very present help in trouble.*" "*Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need*" (Hebrews 4:16).

Read Joshua 20:1-6.

1. What does the word refuge mean to you?
2. What attribute of God does the appointment of these cities highlight?
3. In the ancient world, blood revenge was widely practiced. According to Genesis 9:5-6, what was this principle based upon? Also read Exodus 21:23-25.ⁱⁱ
4. Under what conditions was the manslayer to seek immediate refuge? Who pursued him?

The individual who acted as the "avenger of blood" was also known as the "kinsmen redeemer" (a term used only in the book of Ruth). In short, the *ga'al* was the nearest male blood "relative who, according to various laws found in the Pentateuch, had the privilege or responsibility to act for a relative who was in trouble, danger, or need of vindication... He [was] designated as [one] who delivers or rescues (Genesis 48:16; Exodus 6:6); redeems property (Leviticus 27:9-25) or person (25:47-55); avenges the murder of a relative as a guiltless executioner (Numbers 35:9-34); and receives restitution for wrong done to a relative who has since died (5:8). This idea is most clearly illustrated in the Book of Ruth."ⁱⁱⁱ

"The law of blood-feud among the Hebrews was all in the direction of restricting the wild justice of revenge, and of entrusting it to certain chosen persons out of the kindred of the murdered man.[This] did not so much put the sword into the hand of the next-of-kin as strike it out of the hand of all the rest of the clan."^{iv}

5. Per Joshua 20:4, who made the provisional decision to offer sanctuary to the manslayer?

6. Under what obligation were the city's citizens? (vv.4-5)

7. Now turn to Numbers 35 and read verses 6, 9-34. Who dwelt in the cities of refuge? (v.6)

8. To whom did these cities offer sanctuary? (v.15, Joshua 20:9)

9. What is the difference between manslaughter and murder according to this passage? (vv.16-23)

Also read Deuteronomy 19:1-13. What additional descriptions are given to make the distinction?

10. How does hate progress to murder? (See Matthew 15:19, James 1:13-16.)

11. Read Matthew 5:21-26. How does Christ define murder? Who is in danger of judgment?

12. According to Jewish law, what would occur if a man was accused unjustly? Read Deuteronomy 19:15-21 and Proverbs 19:9.

What necessity does this place on speaking the truth, free from speculation, opinion, and assumption?

13. In Matthew 5, regardless of who is at fault, what action are we to take to keep feelings of anger from progressing? (vv.23-26)

Continuing in Matthew 5:38-48, how are we to retaliate against those who have intentionally harmed us? Read Paul's words in Romans 12:17-21.

14. How might Jesus' words have been an affront to the law-keeping, blood-avenging Jews? Are they an affront to you?

15. Return to Numbers 35. Who would conduct the final judgement between the parties? What was required to condemn a man? (v.30)
16. What was the penalty for murder? What was the penalty for unintentionally slaying a man? (v.25) Do you believe these are fair sentences? Explain.
17. Why might the manslayers' release be contingent upon the high priest's death? (For further consideration, later read Hebrews 9:11-10:18.)^v
18. If a man failed to follow the stipulations set forth for asylum, what consequences would he face? (Numbers 35:26-28) Is this just? Why or why not?
19. Why was no ransom to be given for the manslayer's redemption? (vv.31-34)

Return to Joshua and read 20:7-9.

20. List the cities designated as places of refuge.
21. According to Deuteronomy 19:2-3, why were these cities chosen?

22. Why was it important to maintain a clear route?

"According to Jewish tradition the roads leading to these cities were kept in excellent condition and the crossroads were well marked with signposts reading, "Refuge! Refuge!" Runners were also stationed along the way to guide the fugitives."^{vi}

23. For whom is God a refuge? Read Psalm 9:9, 18:2, 27:5, 31:20, 57:1, 61:1-4, Proverbs 14:26 and Isaiah 25:4.

24. What similarities exist between the cities of refuge and the believer's refuge in Jesus?

David Guzik notes:

- 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.
- Both Jesus and the cities 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.
- Both Jesus and the cities of refuge became a place where the one in need would *live*; you didn't come to a city of refuge in time of need just to look around.
- Both Jesus and the cities of refuge are the *only alternative* for the one in need; without this specific protection, they will be destroyed.
- Both Jesus and the cities of refuge provide protection *only within their boundaries*; to go outside means death.
- With both Jesus and the cities of refuge, full freedom comes with the *death of the High Priest*.

A crucial distinction between the cities of refuge and our refuge in Jesus.

- The cities of refuge only helped the *innocent*, but the *guilty* can come to Jesus and find refuge.^{vii}

Hebrews 6:18b says, "We who have run for our very lives to God have every reason to grab the promised hope with both hands and never let go" (MSG).

ⁱ Heitzig, Lenya & Penny Rose. (2008). *Live Fearlessly: A Study in the Book of Joshua*. (P. 295). Colorado Springs, Colorado: Cook Communications.

ⁱⁱ The avenging of blood is first noted in Genesis 4.

ⁱⁱⁱ Bramer, S. J. (1996). *Kinsman-Redeemer*. In *Evangelical dictionary of biblical theology* (electronic ed., pp. 456-457). Grand Rapids: Baker Book House.

^{iv} https://biblehub.com/library/maclaren/expositions_of_holy_scripture_h/the_kinsman-redeemer.htm

^v The Talmud (the central text of Rabbinic Judaism and the primary source of Jewish religious law and Jewish theology) states that the death of a righteous person atones (Moed Katan 28a).

^{vi} Campbell, D. K. (1985). *Joshua*. In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 1, p. 363). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

^{vii} Guzik, David. <https://enduringword.com/bible-commentary/joshua-20/>