

## Joshua Chapter 20

Verses 1-9: The “cities of refuge” were commanded by “Moses” (21:13-38; Num. 35:25-32). During the wilderness years, fugitives could run to the tabernacle and grab hold of the horns of the altar for safety. With the people scattered to their own parts of the Promised Land, so many of them were now far from the tabernacle that Joshua designated six cities of refuge throughout the land in its place. According to Moses’ instructions, they were to be in mountaintop locations, easily accessible to everyone by a day’s journey so that, after a fatal accident, a person could find safe harbor from any quick judgment or retaliation by the “avenger of blood” (usually a family member of the deceased).

### **Joshua 20:1 "The LORD also spake unto Joshua, saying,"**

Out of the tabernacle, at the door of which he with the high priest and princes were. The Lord had spoken to him before concerning dividing the land among the tribes (Joshua 13:1). And this being done he speaks to him again.

"Saying": As follows.

This is a repeating directly from the LORD to Joshua. He had given this same message to Moses about the cities of refuge.

Verses 2-9: It was the duty of the avenger of blood to punish the murderer of his nearest relative (Deut. 19:12). If the homicide was unintentional, the killer could flee to a city “of refuge” to await a fair trial. Six such “cities”, all of them Levitical towns, are so designated (compare Num. 35:10-15). There were three on each side of the Jordan, conveniently distributed throughout the areas for easy access (compare Deut. 4:41-43; 19:1-6). After a preliminary inquiry in the city of refuge, the man who had committed the homicide would be granted a trial “before the congregation” of the city in or closest to where the slaying took place (compare Num. 35:24-25; Deut. 19:12). If he was found innocent, the defendant could then reside in the city of refuge “until the death of the high priest” (verse 6; compare Exodus 21:13). The manslayer was protected only within the precincts of the city of refuge (Num. 35:26-28). After the death of the high priest, the innocent slayer was free to reside in his own city (verse 6; compare Num. 35:24-25). If convicted of his crime, the slayer was to be punished by death (compare Exodus 20:13; 21:12; Lev. 24:17; Num. 35:31). As formally given here, the law of asylum for unintentional homicide applied equally to the stranger and to the native Israelite (verse 9).

“Cities of Refuge”: Moses had spoken God’s Word to name 6 cities in Israel as refuge centers. A person who inadvertently killed another could flee to the nearest of these for protection (compare Num. 35:9-34). Three lay west of the Jordan and 3 lay to the east, each reachable in a day for those in its area. The slayer could flee there to escape pursuit by a family member seeking to exact private justice. Authorities at the refuge protected him and escorted him to a trial. If found innocent, he was guarded at the refuge until the death of the current High-Priest, a kind of statute

of limitations (Joshua 20:6). He could then return home. If found guilty of murder, he suffered due punishment.

**Joshua 20:2 "Speak to the children of Israel, saying, Appoint out for you cities of refuge, whereof I spake unto you by the hand of Moses:"**

Whom the affair concerned the Lord spake to Joshua about, they having now the whole land divided among them.

"Appoint out for you cities of refuge": Of the name, nature, use, and number of these cities (see notes on Num. 35:6).

"Whereof I spake unto you by the hand of Moses": See (Num. 35:1).

This is the very thing the Lord had spoken to Moses about the cities of refuge.

Numbers 35:11-14 "Then ye shall appoint you cities to be cities of refuge for you; that the slayer may flee thither, which killeth any person at unawares." "And they shall be unto you cities for refuge from the avenger; that the manslayer die not, until he stand before the congregation in judgment." "And of these cities which ye shall give six cities shall ye have for refuge." "Ye shall give three cities on this side Jordan, and three cities shall ye give in the land of Canaan, [which] shall be cities of refuge."

**Joshua 20:3 "That the slayer that killeth [any] person unawares [and] unwittingly may flee thither: and they shall be your refuge from the avenger of blood."**

Who through mere accident, and without design, killed a person, friend or foe, one of his own kindred, or a stranger. Without any malice against him, or intention to take away his life.

"And they shall be your refuge from the avenger of blood": From any of the relations of the deceased, who might be stirred up to avenge the blood of his kinsman on the slayer (see Num. 35:12).

The person who murders someone, will not be allowed to come to the city of refuge. This is a place of safety for the person, who accidentally kills someone. The wording of the law given to Joshua here, is the same as that in Numbers and Deuteronomy. Moses had finished those books before his death. This law would have been available to Joshua, but God spoke to Joshua also. Perhaps the speaking was to verify to Joshua that he should do this. It was the custom for the relative of the one slain, to hunt the killer down and take revenge. This city would be a place to stay in safety until it was determined whether this was accidental, or on purpose.

**Joshua 20:4 "And when he that doth flee unto one of those cities shall stand at the entering of the gate of the city, and shall declare his cause in the ears of the elders of that city, they shall take him into the city unto them, and give him a place, that he may dwell among them."**

Any one of them, that was nearest to him.

"Shall stand at the entering of the gate of the city": For he might not rush in without leave.

"And shall declare his cause in the ears of the elders of that city": Lay before them the whole matter, how that he had killed a person unawares. By what means it came about, and that it was merely through error, without any malicious design, and was a mere accident.

"They shall take him into the city unto them": Directly, lest the avenger of blood should come and seize on him, and kill him. And they were to take him into the city, not only to prevent that, but to examine him still more closely about the matter, and get further satisfaction. And being satisfied, were to continue him in it.

"And give him a place, that he might dwell among them": Until his death, or the death of the high priest, if that was first. Kimchi observes from their Rabbins, that he was not to hire a house all the time of his dwelling there. But was to have one freely, because it is said, "and give him", etc.

Even when the slayer arrives in the city of refuge, it is the elders of the city that decide whether he should enter or not. The two key words (in verse 3 above), are unawares and unwittingly, either would not have been through malice. This is what the elders must determine. Does the one seeking safety fit either of these categories? If he does, he can enter in.

**Joshua 20:5 "And if the avenger of blood pursue after him, then they shall not deliver the slayer up into his hand; because he smote his neighbor unwittingly, and hated him not beforetime."**

To the city of refuge, whither he is fled, and demand him.

"Then they shall not deliver the slayer up into his hands": To be slain by him, but shall protect him.

"Because he smote his neighbor unwittingly, and hated him not beforetime" (see notes on Num. 35:22-23; and Deut. 19:6).

The avenger was usually a close relative. In the heat of the death of a loved one, it is sometimes difficult to accept the fact that it was an accident. The slayer would be safe until his trial. The Greeks and Romans had a much different look at this same thing. There was safety for someone who had committed murder with them. The Hebrews had no such law. The slayer must have killed the person with no hate in his heart at all. It had to be an accident.

Verses 6-9: The relationship of the "death of the high priest" to the release of a fugitive anticipates the death of Jesus, the High Priest whose death removes sin and guilt once for all (Heb. 9:11 – 10:18). Just as these cities of refuge were available to both Israelites and foreigners

("the stranger ... among them"), Christ's forgiveness is available to anyone without regard for their nationality (Gal. 3:28; 5:6).

**Joshua 20:6 "And he shall dwell in that city, until he stand before the congregation for judgment, [and] until the death of the high priest that shall be in those days: then shall the slayer return, and come unto his own city, and unto his own house, unto the city from whence he fled."**

That is, until his cause was heard in the court of judicature in his own city, or in any other to which the avenger of blood should appeal (see Num. 35:24). Who if they found him guilty of death, they put him to death. But if only guilty of accidental manslaughter, then they delivered him up to his city of refuge for safety, where he was to abide.

"Until the death of the high priest that shall be in those days": (See Numbers 35:25).

"Then shall the slayer return, and come unto his own city, and unto his own house, unto the city from whence he fled": And live with his family in the enjoyment of his possessions and estates, honors, and privileges belonging to him, as before (see Num. 35:28).

The safety of the slayer is until he is judged innocent, or guilty of premeditated murder. If he is found innocent by the congregation, then he remains in the city of refuge for safety. He cannot return to his original home, until the high priest dies. The death of the high priest, perhaps, symbolizes the death on the cross of the great High Priest (Jesus Christ). He became the substitute for our sin, and pardoned us of all wrong doing. At the death of the high priest, he could resume his normal life at his own home.

**Joshua 20:7 "And they appointed Kedesh in Galilee in mount Naphtali, and Shechem in mount Ephraim, and Kirjath-arba, which [is] Hebron, in the mountain of Judah."**

Of which see (Joshua 19:37). The appointment of this and the two cities following was made by the children of Israel at this time.

"And Shechem in Mount Ephraim": Called Sichem (Gen. 12:6). And Shechem from a prince of that name that possessed it (Gen. 34:2). It fell to the lot of the tribe of Ephraim. Its name in the New Testament is Sychar (John 4:5); and it is now called Neapolis.

"And Kirjath-arba, which is Hebron, in the mountain of Judah": It stood in the hill country of Judea (Luke 1:39), of which see (Joshua 14:15). There seems to be a difficulty here, since this city was before given to Caleb (Joshua 14:13). And yet afterwards given to the Levites, and appointed a city of refuge. The Jews reconcile this by observing, that the city and suburbs were given to the Levites, and fixed for a city of refuge. But the villages and fields, and country around it, and belonging to it, were given to Caleb (Joshua 21:12). And Abarbinel makes no doubt that the children of Judah gave something else to Caleb in lieu of it.

As these cities of refuge were typical of Christ, as has been observed on (Num. 35:29); their names are applicable to him. "Kedesh" signifies "holy" or "holiness"; Christ is holy in both his

natures, divine and human. And so abundantly qualified to be the Mediator, Savior, and Redeemer. And is the fountain of holiness to his people, and is made sanctification to them (Psalm 16:10; 1 Cor. 1:30). And "Shechem" signifies the "shoulder"; and not only the government of the church and people of God is on the shoulder of Christ, but all their sins have been laid upon him, and bore by him; and every particular soul in conversion. Every lost sheep, is looked up by him, and taken up and brought home on his shoulder (Isa. 9:6; Luke 15:4). "Hebron" signifies "fellowship"; in the effectual calling, the saints are called into fellowship with Christ, and their fellowship is with the Father, and his Son Jesus Christ. Through him they have access to God, and communion with him now. And shall have uninterrupted communion with him to all eternity (1 Cor. 1:9; John 17:24).

These three cities chosen were easy to get to for everyone. Kedesh was in the north, Shechem was in the center, and Hebron was in the south. It is interesting to me, that all three are spoken of as mountains. All of these were Levitical cities, which had been an early requirement for cities of refuge. God had given great wisdom to the Levites to determine innocence or guilt, in such matters. This is the first time in Scripture that Galilee is used.

**Joshua 20:8 "And on the other side Jordan by Jericho eastward, they assigned Bezer in the wilderness upon the plain out of the tribe of Reuben, and Ramoth in Gilead out of the tribe of Gad, and Golan in Bashan out of the tribe of Manasseh."**

In the country possessed by the tribes of Reuben and Gad, and the half tribe of Manasseh.

"They assigned Bezer in the wilderness, upon the plain, out of the tribe of Reuben, and Ramoth in Gilead out of the tribe of Gad, and Golan in Bashan out of the tribe of Manasseh": Of these places, and the signification of their names, and of the application of them to Christ, the antitype of the cities of refuge (see notes on Deut. 4:43). These last cities were not appointed now, they were appointed in the times of Moses, and severed by him (Deut. 4:41). Nor are they here said to be appointed, but to be assigned or "given". They were now delivered up into the hands of the Levites for cities of refuge. For they were before severed for that use. They were not, according to the Jews, made use of as such, until the other three were appointed.

These three cities were chosen on the eastern side of the River Jordan. Bezer was directly across the river from Jericho. Notice one city was chosen out of each tribe. Again, all three of these cities chosen were Levitical cities. The three cities were Bezer, Ramoth, and Golan.

**Joshua 20:9 "These were the cities appointed for all the children of Israel, and for the stranger that sojourneth among them, that whosoever killeth [any] person at unawares might flee thither, and not die by the hand of the avenger of blood, until he stood before the congregation."**

For the common use of them all, and not for that tribe only in which they stood.

"And for the stranger that sojourneth among them": Not only for the proselytes of righteousness, but for the proselytes of the gate also, as well as for the natives of Israel. Christ is a refuge for Jews and Gentiles, for all sinners that flee to him.

"That whosoever killeth any person unawares might flee thither": And find shelter and safety.

"And not die by the hand of the avenger of blood": Getting there before he could overtake him.

"Until he stood before the congregation": Either before the congregation, the elders of the city, or court of judicature in the city of refuge. Or before the court of his own city, from whence he fled, if summoned thither.

The city of refuge was for anyone facing this problem. It guaranteed justice for those innocent of shedding the blood of man. They would not protect them, if they were found guilty of murder. They would turn them over to the avenger. The innocent was treated as a member of the community with full privileges.

It is interesting to look at the meaning of the names of the cities of refuge. "Kedesh" means holy. "Shechem" means shoulder. "Hebron" means fellowship. "Bezer" means fortification. "Ramoah" means height, or exaltation. "Golan" means exaltation. All of these names show us Jesus Christ, who is our refuge. He is our very present help in trouble. He is holy. He is a shoulder for us to lean upon. He is our very best friend. We can fellowship with Him when no one wants us. He builds a hedge around us and He is our fortification. He is our joy (exaltation). The names of the cities of refuge are a description of Jesus Christ (our protector).

### **Joshua Chapter 20 Questions**

1. Who had the LORD previously given this message to?
2. Who can flee to the city of refuge?
3. Who penned Numbers and Deuteronomy?
4. Who was the revenger of someone who was slain?
5. What must the slayer do to get into the city?
6. Who decides whether he can enter, or not?
7. Do they give the slayer over to the avenger of blood?
8. What was the law of the Greeks and Romans, pertaining to this same thing?
9. How long shall the slayer remain in the city of refuge?
10. When will he be allowed to go home in safety?
11. What does the death of the high priest symbolize?
12. What 3 cities on the west side of Jordan were chosen for cities of refuge?

13. Where were they located?
14. All of these were \_\_\_\_\_ cities.
15. What 3 cities were chosen on the east side of the Jordan?
16. Which city was directly across from Jericho?
17. How did the law differ for the stranger?
18. What does "Kedesh" mean?
19. What does "Shechem" mean?
20. What does "Hebron" mean?
21. What does "Bezer" mean?
22. What does "Ramoth" and "Golan" mean?
23. Who does the meaning of these names describe?