

Jesus, Our Refuge
Joshua 20:1-9 & Numbers 35:9-15

We are not studying Joshua 11-19 because it is a list of the 31 kings defeated by Moses and Joshua and a detailed description of each tribe's inheritance of the land. The entire section rehearses God's faithfulness to Israel but preaching through it would be like reading the will of a massive estate. There are 3 important things to note:

- a) 13:1 - The importance of these chapters is that God has gifted the land to Israel. God is the legal title-holder and chapters 11-19 record Joshua's retitling of the land and it must be completed before Joshua dies.
- b) 14:6-15 – Caleb recounts Israel's failure and his faithfulness to God at Kadesh-Barnea. God gives him Hebron, a fertile city about 15 miles south of Jerusalem and David's first capitol.
- c) The Tabernacle is moved from Gilgal to Shiloh where it remains for hundreds of years until it is captured by the Philistines. Thereafter, it will be temporarily moved to Gibeon before it is placed in Solomon's temple in Jerusalem.

One of the most important remaining matters concerns the cities of refuge set up in the Promised Land. The Levites or Levitical priests lived in the cities of refuge. They were established to provide refuge for a person who accidentally committed murder.

Exodus 21:12-14 – *Whoever strikes a man so that he dies shall be put to death. "But if he did not lie in wait for him, but God let him fall into his hand, then I will appoint for you a place to which he may flee. "But if a man willfully attacks another to kill him by cunning, you shall take him from my altar, that he may die.*

Numbers 35:9-15 – *And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When you cross the Jordan into the land of Canaan, "then you shall select cities to be cities of refuge for you, that the manslayer who kills any person without intent may flee there. "The cities shall be for you a refuge from the avenger, that the manslayer may not die until he stands before the congregation for judgment. "And the cities that you give shall be your six cities of refuge." You shall give three cities beyond the Jordan, and three cities in the land of Canaan, to be cities of refuge. "These six cities shall be for refuge for the people of Israel, and for the stranger and for the sojourner among them, that anyone who kills any person without intent may flee there.*

The emphasis in this account is Joshua's obedience and God's mercy. The cities of refuge remind us that every human being is created in the image of God and as such, deserves respect and blessing.

First: The Command to Establish the Cities. 1-2

There are six cities where a person who has committed accidental murder may flee for safety.

Seven in scripture is a number of perfection or completion. There are six cities here because they only protect the physical life and not the spiritual life.

These cities represent incomplete refuge because they can't save what is most important; your soul, and their safety is only temporary and not eternal.

Second: The Definition of Murder. 3

In biblical law, intentional killing or murder is to be killed by the state; the basis for what we call capital punishment.

There is a biblical difference between manslaughter which is killing someone without malice or forethought, and intentionally murdering someone.

“Avenger of blood” = *go-el had-am* = kinsman redeemer

A kinsman redeemer is the person who has legal right to fulfil an obligation. The most famous case of a kinsman redeemer is Boaz who avenged Elimelech's death by taking Ruth as his wife.

Third: The Specific Instructions. 4-6

Anyone who committed manslaughter was commanded to flee to a city of refuge and explain the circumstances to the elders of the city.

If the elders were convinced, then the person was welcomed into the city. The elders insured:

- a) An appropriate trial took place in the home city (Numbers 35:24-25)
- b) The person remained there until the high priest dies, at which point the accused person could return home with no fear of reprisal

As long as the high priest lived, the accused person had to remain within the walls. If he ventured outside its walls at any time, the avenger of blood was free to take his life. It was in the best interest of the fugitive to stay securely inside the city.

The high priest represented Israel before God on the day of Atonement when Israel's sins were transferred to an animal sacrifice and guilt was removed for another year.

The death of the high priest symbolically atones for the guilt of the person who committed manslaughter.

- a) We committed manslaughter against Jesus

but in the most unique case,

- b) His own death secures our freedom

Romans 5:2a - *Through him we have also obtained access by faith^[b] into this grace in which we stand...*

IMP: The avenger seeking our death is not Satan but God.

Fourth: The Listing of the Cities. 7-8

Three of these cities are on the Western side of Jordan and three of them are on the Eastern side of Jordan. No place in Israel was more than a single day's journey from one of the cities of refuge.

- a) Kedesh, in the northwest, signifying "righteousness."
- b) Shechem, in Central Palestine, west of the Jordan, meaning "a shoulder."
- c) Hebron, in Southwestern Palestine = "friendship and love."
- d) Bezer, signifying "security."
- e) Ramoth, which means "heights."
- f) Golan, the last, means "a circle," signifying the everlasting things.

Fifth: The Final Instructions. 9

The cities were not only for Israel but for any Gentile who lived in Israel or any foreigner passing through the nation. They were accessible from all places and to all people. The roads that led to them were always kept in good repair, at the expense of the government. The way was always open, both day and night, for any fugitive that should fly to the asylum. The gates of the city were continually open, and persons there to welcome the fugitive the moment he might arrive, and to provide him with every necessary of life. No one was allowed to obstruct his progress on his journey. Everybody made way for him, and there was no possibility of mistaking the way, for at every crossing, and often along the way, were mile posts and inscriptions, pointing in the right direction, and the word "Refuge" written on each post, so that he could read even while he ran.

Habakkuk 2:2 - Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so he may run who reads it.

Sixth: The Jesus these Cities Represent.

Just like the accused person, we flee to Christ and state our case. We don't defend ourselves but confess we are sons of Adam and deserve to die. We have taken a life, the life of Christ, but unknowingly and unwillingly.

In his mercy, God grants us entrance into Christ where we are saved by the death and life of our high priest.

Hebrews 7:23-25 - The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office, but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.

He died. We were saved. Now he's alive forevermore. We are eternally saved.

Think about the six cities again.

- a) Christ is our righteousness. 1 Cor 1:30
- b) He bears us on his shoulders. Luke 15:4
- c) He grants us his friendship and love. 1 John 1:3
- d) In him we are secure. Psalm 91:2; Prov 18:10
- e) He is our security and. Eph 1:13-14
- f) he takes us to eternal heights. John 10:28

Psalm 9:9 - *The LORD is a stronghold for the oppressed, a stronghold [refuge] in times of trouble.*

Psalm 62:5-8 - *For God alone, O my soul, wait in silence, for my hope is from him. 'He only is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be shaken.' On God rests my salvation and my glory; my mighty rock, my refuge is God. 'Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your heart before him; God is a refuge for us. Selah*

Hebrews 6:18 - *we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us.*

We have fled to Jesus Christ, and He is our eternal refuge. As our High Priest, He will never die (Hebrews 7:23-25); and we have eternal salvation. No avenger can touch us, because He has already died and arisen from the dead.

Seventh: Our Eternal City

Revelation 21:22 – *And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb.*

*When overwhelmed with grief
My heart within me dies;
Helpless, and far from all relief,
To heaven I lift mine eyes.*

*Oh, lead me to the Rock
That's high above my head;
And make the covert of thy wings
My shelter and my shade.*

*Within thy presence, Lord,
Forever I'll abide;
Thou art the tower of my defence,
The refuge where I hide.*

Conclusion: The sinner was required to do three things:

- a) Flee
- b) Cry
- c) Stay

Community Groups:

- 1 – Why were the cities of refuge established?
- 2 – How many were there?
- 3 – Where were they?
- 4 – What is the biblical definition of murder?
- 5 – What is the biblical definition of manslaughter?
- 6 – For whom were the cities of refuge established?

- 7 – Why would a person guilty of manslaughter run to a city of refuge?
- 8 – What must he do when he arrived?
- 9 – What was the responsibility of the elders?
- 10 – How long was a person safe in the city of refuge?
- 11 – What happened when the High Priest died?
- 12 – How is Christ our city of refuge?
- 13 – How is Christ our High Priest?
- 14 – How do the names of the cities of refuge depict all that Jesus does for us?
- 15 – Are you resting in Jesus as your refuge? What is taking your peace and joy from you even though you are safe in Him?
- Think about this past Thanksgiving and Christmas coming up on the calendar.
- 15 – How might you be a city of refuge for those who are guilty of sin?
- 16 – For whom particularly are you or could you be a city of refuge?
- 17 – Like Jesus, what could you do for someone who needs refuge?
- 18 – Take time to pray for those you know who need refuge in Jesus.

Important note: The avenger seeking our death is not Satan but God.

According to John 3:16, our greatest need is to be saved from perishing. But what does *perish* mean? The best way to answer is to consider biblical statements that illuminate this teaching. Two verses earlier Jesus said, “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.” Jesus was referring to a deadly episode in Israel’s history. During the exodus, the people had complained against God, so the Lord sent fiery serpents among them, and many people were bitten and died. This illustrates the warning in [John 3:16](#) that without God’s love we will perish—that is, we will die. But the Israelites in [Numbers 21:6](#) were dying because “the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died.” It isn’t Satan but God who has the keys to death and hades ([Rev 1:17-18](#)).

Those snakes point back to the entry of sin into the world, when the Serpent tempted Adam and Eve to disobey God’s command. God had warned them not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, “for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die” ([Gen. 2:17b](#)). Again, it was not Satan who gave the prohibition and warned about death. It was God. Through their sin as our first parents, and through our own sins, the poison of death has entered our souls. Unless we are saved, we will experience everlasting death. To perish in this sense does not mean to cease to exist, but to be “tormented day and night forever” ([Rev. 20:10b](#)) by God. Paul says that those who perish in their sins “will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might” ([2 Thess. 1:9](#)).

This makes God's love and grace all the more amazing. He knew, when he gave Adam and Eve the original prohibition that they would disobey and that he would send his son to die for our sin. Only an eternal God could punish us forever. Only an eternal God could save us forever. How amazing is God's love?

*Jesus sought me when a stranger
Wandering from the fold of God
He, to rescue me from danger
Interposed His precious blood*