

# ENTER AT YOUR OWN REST

## Studies in the Book of Joshua

*"Full blessing in the Christian life is not bestowed except to eager, hungry people who press in to receive it"*

*Alan Redpath*

Text

Joshua 20:1-9

Topic

Joshua designates six cities of refuge to provide shelter for those who commit manslaughter

Title

*"Gimme Shelter"*

Joshua 20:1 The Lord also spoke to Joshua, saying,

Joshua 20:2 "Speak to the children of Israel, saying: 'Appoint for yourselves cities of refuge, of which I spoke to you through Moses,

Joshua 20:3 that the slayer who kills a person accidentally or unintentionally may flee there; and they shall be your refuge from the avenger of blood.

Joshua 20:4 And when he flees to one of those cities, and stands at the entrance of the gate of the city, and declares his case in the hearing of the elders of that city, they shall take him into the city as one of them, and give him a place, that he may dwell among them.

Joshua 20:5 Then if the avenger of blood pursues him, they shall not deliver the slayer into his hand, because he struck his neighbor unintentionally, but did not hate him beforehand.

Joshua 20:6 And he shall dwell in that city until he stands before the congregation for judgment, and until the death of the one who is high priest in those days. Then the slayer may return and come to his own city and his own house, to the city from which he fled.' "

Joshua 20:7 So they appointed Kedesh in Galilee, in the mountains of Naphtali, Shechem in the mountains of Ephraim, and Kirjath Arba (which is Hebron) in the mountains of Judah.

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

Joshua 20:9 These were the cities appointed for all the children of Israel and for the stranger who dwelt among them, that whoever killed a person accidentally might flee

there, and not die by the hand of the avenger of blood until he stood before the congregation.

## Introduction

The cities of refuge give us a new illustration to help us understand what it means to be a Christian.

**Every Christian is a refugee who has found safety and shelter in the Lord. Every church is a refugee camp.**

It's true. Human beings are lost in sin, separated from our heavenly Father. Romans 6:23 warns us that the consequences of our sin is death. We are being pursued by the avenger of blood. If we do not find refuge before we die we will be lost eternally.

God has provided refuge in Jesus Christ. Whosoever will believe in Him can find safety from eternal death. And they find themselves in a new 'city,' as it were - a community of fellow refugees called the church.

Once we're safe and settled we obviously want family and friends who are lost to find refuge in Jesus and in His church. As we examine the cities of refuge mentioned in our text we will be encouraged about how to go about explaining and maintaining the way to spiritual refuge.

I'll organize my thoughts around two points: #1 It's Your Joy To Explain The Way To Spiritual Refuge, and #2 It's Your Job To Maintain The Way To Spiritual Refuge.

#1 It's Your Joy  
To Explain The Way To Spiritual Refuge  
(v1-6)

The Israelites crossed the Jordan River and in a seven year military campaign subdued all their enemies. Joshua distributed the land by lot to each tribe. There was one more order of business and it's what we read about in chapters twenty and twenty-one.

Two types of special cities were to be designated throughout the Promised Land. They were cities of refuge and cities for the Levites who had no

inheritance of their own as a tribe. We're reading about the first type of cities, the cities of refuge.

Joshua 20:1 The Lord also spoke to Joshua, saying,  
Joshua 20:2 "Speak to the children of Israel, saying: 'Appoint for yourselves cities of refuge, of which I spoke to you through Moses,

In Genesis 9:6 God laid down a basic rule that anyone who shed blood by murder should pay for their crime with their own blood.

Genesis 9:6 "Whoever sheds man's blood, By man his blood shall be shed; For in the image of God He made man.

The sanctity of human life is affirmed by requiring the highest price if a life is unjustly taken by murder.

But God explained very carefully in other passages that there was to be a distinction made between premeditated murder and what today we call manslaughter, the unpremeditated killing of another person (Exodus 21, Numbers 35, and Deuteronomy 19).

Listen to what God said through Moses in Exodus 21:12-14.

Exodus 21:12 "He who strikes a man so that he dies shall surely be put to death.  
Exodus 21:13 However, if he did not lie in wait, but God delivered him into his hand, then I will appoint for you a place where he may flee.  
Exodus 21:14 "But if a man acts with premeditation against his neighbor, to kill him by treachery, you shall take him from My altar, that he may die.

During the forty years that the nation of Israel wandered in the wilderness and during the seven years of military conquest in Canaan the Israelites camped around the tabernacle. A slayer would seek refuge in the tabernacle, at the altar, until his case could be decided.

Now that the tribes had received their land they would be scattered away from the tabernacle. It would be impractical to make someone flee for refuge to the tabernacle. They needed cities of refuge scattered throughout the land.

Scholars estimate no one would have a journey of more than thirty miles from anywhere in the land to a designated city of refuge.

Joshua 20:3 that the slayer who kills a person accidentally or unintentionally may flee there; and they shall be your refuge from the avenger of blood.

There was no police force in Israel. It was up to each family to avenge murders. The nearest blood relative to the deceased was charged with the responsibility of executing the murderer. This person's own emotional subjectivity, passion, and anger at the loss of their family member might, however, cloud their judgment. They might end up avenging the death by indiscriminately killing someone who wasn't guilty of a capital crime. That's why these cities of refuge were needed.

Joshua 20:4 And when he flees to one of those cities, and stands at the entrance of the gate of the city, and declares his case in the hearing of the elders of that city, they shall take him into the city as one of them, and give him a place, that he may dwell among them.

Joshua 20:5 Then if the avenger of blood pursues him, they shall not deliver the slayer into his hand, because he struck his neighbor unintentionally, but did not hate him beforehand.

The elders of the city of refuge would determine by investigation whether the incident was murder or manslaughter. If it was murder the slayer would be delivered to the avenger of blood for capital punishment. If it was manslaughter the slayer would not be delivered to the avenger of blood.

He would, however, be required to live in the city of refuge if he wanted to remain safe.

Joshua 20:6 And he shall dwell in that city until he stands before the congregation for judgment, and until the death of the one who is high priest in those days. Then the slayer may return and come to his own city and his own house, to the city from which he fled.' "

He must live there as a sort of sentence for manslaughter until the death of the high priest which served as a sort of statute of limitations.

The cities of refuge were what the writer of the Book of Hebrews had in mind when he said of our relationship with Jesus,

Hebrews 6:18 ...[we] have fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope set before us.

We thus are not only justified in seeing the cities of refuge as a type of Jesus; we are instructed to do so.

Let's draw a few comparisons between Jesus and these cities:

1. The cities were placed in such a way as to make them easily accessible. It's the same for anyone seeking Jesus. He is easily accessible by grace through faith.
2. The gates of the cities of refuge were always opened and never locked. With Jesus you don't need to discover some secret spiritual insight. There are no religious locks and keys. You can come anytime just as you are and enter.
3. The cities of refuge provided shelter and sustenance for the slayer as long as he lived there. In Jesus we have a sufficient Savior who provides every spiritual blessing in abundance as we abide in Him.
4. The only place of safety and security was in the city of refuge. So, too, Jesus is the only way to God and the only place of spiritual salvation and security.
5. The cities of refuge were open not only to Jews but to anyone in the land (v9). God's offer of salvation in Jesus is to whosoever will believe.

Lives all around you are being torn apart by spiritual forces. Marriages are failing. Children and young adults are falling into terrible habits. Your family and friends desperately need safety and shelter.

It is our joy to explain to them that there is shelter for them in the Lord and in His church. There is a place where they will find refuge and be safe eternally and where they can experience life more abundantly.

There's something more, after we explain the way...

#2 It's Your Job  
To Maintain The Way To Spiritual Refuge  
(v7-9)

The chapter gives the names and locations of the original six cities.

Joshua 20:7 So they appointed Kedesh in Galilee, in the mountains of Naphtali, Shechem in the mountains of Ephraim, and Kirjath Arba (which is Hebron) in the mountains of Judah.

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

Joshua 20:9 These were the cities appointed for all the children of Israel and for the stranger who dwelt among them, that whoever killed a person accidentally might flee there, and not die by the hand of the avenger of blood until he stood before the congregation.

To be safe you first had to get to a city of refuge. They were scattered throughout the land, three on each side of the Jordan River. But you had to know how to get there.

Thus the Jews took access to these cities very seriously. Over the years they developed many ordinances referring to the maintaining of these cities. Among the things you can read about in Jewish sources<sup>1</sup> are the following:

- The roads leading to a city of refuge were to be clearly designated by signposts at any crossroads marked *Miklat* (Refuge).
- The roads leading to a city of refuge were made twice the normal width of other roads and were kept clear of debris.
- Bridges must be built over every ravine the road came to so that a slayer did not have the hazard of descending and ascending.
- The roads were to be inspected and repaired every spring after the heavy rains.
- The cities must be well-stocked with supplies to provide for any slayers who were forced to stay possibly for a period of years.

I'm sure there were many other things that needed to be done to maintain the way to refuge.

When I say to us "It's your job to maintain the way to spiritual refuge," I mean that we have the blessed privilege of keeping both our personal Christian lives and our corporate church life in order so no one is hindered as they come seeking refuge.

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<sup>1</sup> extrabiblical sources include the Mishnah, Tosefta, and both Talmudim of the treatise Makkot ii.

For example: As a Christian you are a signpost to your family and friends. You point the way to the Lord. What is your life saying as a sign?

When you're driving somewhere you depend upon signage. Some signs cause you delay. "Detour" is a sign I hate to see.

On a spiritual level I don't want my life to proclaim "Detour" to family and friends because I've decided to quit moving forward in my walk or have backslidden. I want them to see my life saying "One Way."

It's good to think about our church as a city of refuge:

- The gates to the cities of refuge were always open. It doesn't mean we leave our building unlocked! It means we show hospitality and love to those seeking refuge. It means we are a place of grace and mercy.
- The cities of refuge needed to be well-stocked in case a fugitive showed up. Our church therefore needs to be well-stocked. It needs to be well-stocked with volunteers who are manning their posts. You never know when a fugitive is going to arrive and want to drop a child off in the Children's Ministry... or get an order of biscuits and gravy in the Cafe... or come forward for prayer. Anything any of us do should be done with the thought that today is the day someone will arrive desperate and in need of Jesus and just my being here might make all the difference in the world to them.
- Our church should be well-stocked with spiritual resources. We should be singing and having a melody in our hearts. Our conversations, often within earshot, should be seasoned with grace. We should want to keep distractions to a minimum and to maximize the teaching of God's Word.
- We stock our church by giving sacrificially of our time, our talent, and our treasure. It should be well-stocked by our generosity in all these areas.

You don't need dozens of examples. Just catch-on to the general principle that at any moment, during a service or during the week, a fugitive may need to find their way to Calvary Hanford as a community of refuge. It's your blessed job to maintain the way to refuge here.