

## “A Refuge”

*The eighty-fourth in a series: “I Will be Your God and You Will Be My People.”*

**Texts: Joshua 20:1-9; Hebrews 10:1-18**

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Just as he promised he would do, YHWH fought on the side of Israel. After an extended military campaign, the armies of Israel wiped out two large Canaanite armies. Joshua’s men captured thirty-one Canaanite cities, killing everyone in them including their kings. At long last, God’s people dwell in peace in that good land God which had promised to give them. But this comes only after Israel was delivered from four hundred years of bondage and slavery in Egypt, after entering into a covenant with YHWH at Mount Sinai, after wandering throughout the Sinai desert for forty years, after crossing the Jordan River on dry ground and then conquering Jericho, as well as defeating two large Amorite armies and a host of other Canaanite tribes. In Joshua 11:23, Joshua simply says, “*the land had rest from war.*” With these words, we have reached yet another turning point in the great redemptive drama. The land once promised to Israel is now their home. The promise has become reality. We now shift from the account of battle (the Conquest) to a distribution of the spoils of war as YHWH gives his people legal title to the land.

We now fast-forward from the end of chapter 11 (where we left off last time), to verses 1-9 of chapter 20. The reason for skipping so far ahead in our study of Joshua has to do with the structure of the book itself. In Joshua 12, we find a detailed list of the thirty-one kings defeated by Moses and Joshua. Chapters 13-21 contain a lengthy and very detailed description of how the land of Canaan was divided up among the various tribes of Israel and their families. Understandably, most readers find themselves drawn to the dramatic first half of the book, while these detailed lists in the next section of Joshua are not as interesting. The materials in these chapters are, in effect, legal documents (deeds), which ensure that the land of Canaan is properly distributed to each tribe just as Moses commanded. This entire section of Joshua stands as a glorious testimony to the fact that God is faithful to his promise and that he will give his people their inheritance. If you have read through this section of Joshua, you know that preaching through these chapters would be like the reading of a will in which someone’s massive estate was divided up among family members. Very important stuff. But not very preachable. So, we now fast forward to chapter twenty.

**A**lthough we are skipping over this lengthy description of the “divvying up of the land,” there are several important things mentioned in these chapters which are well-worth highlighting.

The first of these is the mention of Joshua’s advanced age and a reference to several outlying areas still to be captured by Israel. In Joshua 13:1, we read that “*now Joshua was old and advanced in years, and the LORD said to him, ‘You are old and advanced in years, and there remains yet very much land to possess.’*” This is not merely a declaration that Joshua was old—by now that was certainly the case—this is also an important announcement to the people of Israel that there was still much to do. In order for the people to possess legal title to the land, this must be done while Joshua, the covenant mediator, is still alive. The armies of Israel must capture the remaining outlying areas and Joshua must apportion the land among the twelve tribes so that the *promised* inheritance is actually realized *before* he dies.

The remaining areas to be conquered are spelled out in verses 2-5 of chapter 13 and includes areas to the far north and south lying at, or near, the established borders of Canaan. In other words, Israel still needs to capture several of outlying areas, in effect, extending Canaan’s boundaries to include all of that land

YHWH promised to his people, some of which extended beyond the current boundaries of land occupied by “Canaanites.” The land to the south belonged to the Philistines—Israel’s future enemy. This is the first time they are mentioned in the biblical account. The areas to the north include land in what is now the modern nations of Lebanon and Syria.

The redemptive-historical point in these chapters is that this land is a gift from YHWH to his people. It is Israel’s inheritance from their covenant suzerain, YHWH, the great king. The Book of Joshua repeatedly indicates that YHWH is the legal title holder to this land, hence it is YHWH’s to give to his people. That’s the theological justification for the Conquest and the wiping out of the Canaanites who are squatters on YHWH’s land. Once Israel takes possession of all of the land, the legal title will pass to Israel. That is why it is so important for Israel to capture and apportion this land before Joshua dies. And this is why Joshua’s account of this dividing of the land which runs from 13:1 through the end of chapter 21 is so detailed. This is the account of Joshua assigning legal title to the new owners—the members of the twelve tribes. While it reads like a will or a deed, every line in these chapters reminds us that God has kept his promise. Israel now dwells in the land and all the “ites” have been wiped out.

A second matter of interest found in these chapters is the remarkable testimony of Caleb, found in Joshua 14:6-15. As the tribe of Judah is about to receive their inheritance as recounted chapter 14, mention is made of Caleb. Recall that in Genesis 49:8-12, Judah was to be the recipient of a special blessing from Jacob, and one of Judah’s most illustrious sons, Caleb, now recounts his own role in all of this—a testimony of Caleb’s faith and of YHWH’s faithfulness to a younger generation who were born while still in the wilderness. As we read in verse 6, *“then the people of Judah came to Joshua at Gilgal. And Caleb the son of Jephunneh the Kenizzite said to him, ‘You know what the LORD said to Moses the man of God in Kadesh-barnea concerning you and me. I was forty years old when Moses the servant of the LORD sent me from Kadesh-barnea to spy out the land, and I brought him word again as it was in my heart.’”* Caleb was with Joshua from the very beginning, and was forty years old when he and Joshua and ten others were sent by Moses to scout the land of Canaan.

Caleb recounts how this event sadly led to that generation of Israelites who left Egypt being forced to wander for forty years in the wilderness of the Sinai because of their unbelief. *“But my brothers who went up with me made the heart of the people melt; yet I wholly followed the LORD my God. And Moses swore on that day, saying, ‘Surely the land on which your foot has trodden shall be an inheritance for you and your children forever, because you have wholly followed the LORD my God.’ And now, behold, the LORD has kept me alive, just as he said, these forty-five years since the time that the LORD spoke this word to Moses, while Israel walked in the wilderness. And now, behold, I am this day eighty-five years old. I am still as strong today as I was in the day that Moses sent me; my strength now is as my strength was then, for war and for going and coming. So now give me this hill country of which the LORD spoke on that day, for you heard on that day how the Anakim were there, with great fortified cities. It may be that the LORD will be with me, and I shall drive them out just as the LORD said.”*

Like Joshua, Caleb never once wavered in his belief that YHWH would keep his promise and give Israel the land of promise—despite the reputation that the Canaanites had for being savage fighters. Although he was now an old man (and still a formidable soldier), Caleb will live long enough to see the good land where he will live out his days. As we learn in verse 13, *“then Joshua blessed him, and he gave Hebron to Caleb the son of Jephunneh for an inheritance. Therefore Hebron became the inheritance of Caleb the son of Jephunneh the Kenizzite to this day, because he wholly followed the LORD, the God of Israel. Now the name of Hebron formerly was Kiriath-arba. (Arba was the greatest man among the Anakim.) And the land had rest from war.”* The city of Hebron was the center of a very fertile area about fifteen

miles to the south of Jerusalem. Hebron and the area around it is given to Caleb, who is rewarded with his inheritance for his faithfulness. Like Joshua, Caleb is a wonderful example to all of God's people of what it means to believe God's promise despite the seemingly difficulties with God's promises actually coming to pass. Caleb too is another of Israel's great heroes of faith from its greatest age.

One last thing we ought to consider as we fast forward from the end of chapter 11 to chapter 20, is the fact that the tabernacle has been moved from Gilgal, which is near the city of Jericho on the far eastern border of Canaan, northeast to Shiloh. Shiloh is some fifteen miles to the west of Gilgal and is in the region given to the tribe of Ephraim.<sup>1</sup> The ark of the covenant was placed in the tabernacle and remained there for several hundred years until Israel fought the Philistines during the time of Samuel when the ark was captured. The tabernacle was eventually replaced by the temple in Jerusalem, and the ark (now recovered) was taken there as well. But Shiloh remained at the heart of Israel's religious life for several centuries and Gilgal became far less important once the Conquest had been completed.

**H**aving recounted some of the highlights from this lengthy section of Joshua, we now fast forward to our text, Joshua 20:1-9.

Once Joshua concludes his discussion of the way in which the land of Canaan was to be divided among the twelve tribes of Israel, a couple of important matters remain. One of them is addressed in chapter 20. This has to do with the establishment of six so-called "cities of refuge" as well as forty-eight Levitical cities as (described in chapter 21) where the priests could live and where their animals could graze. The basis for establishing these "cities of refuge" wherein a person who accidentally killed someone might find safety, is found back in the Book of Exodus and the giving of the law. In Exodus 21:12-14, Moses wrote that *"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."* This means that the law of God provides relief for someone who accidentally takes the life of another. In modern legal terms these "cities of refuge" offer relief from "manslaughter" or "negligent homicide."

More specific information about what to do when someone is unintentionally killed was given in 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."* What is amazing about this passage is that the LORD commands this of Moses well before the Israelites actually entered the promised land.

In Joshua 20, we read of Joshua carrying out this command and establishing these cities, in yet another instance of Israel's obedience to all the terms of the covenant under Joshua's leadership. Throughout this entire account, the emphasis falls upon both Joshua's obedience to the covenant and upon God's mercy in providing a place of refuge for those who accidentally took another person's life. As we work through this section of Joshua, we should also not overlook the fact that human life is so precious that even when

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<sup>1</sup> See the discussion in Howard, Joshua, 359-360.

a life is taken accidentally, the one who took that life must seek refuge and could be even killed by an avenger should the person not go to one of these cities of refuge and remain there.<sup>2</sup> The taking of life, even accidentally, is a serious matter and relief from this is carefully spelled out in Jewish law.

While this seems a bit odd and a relic of a different time, remember that in this commandment God is protecting life, providing mercy and fulfilling his covenant promise to his people. That which God originally commanded Moses even before the people entered the land is now brought to fruition. This is a theme which resurfaces again and again throughout the Book of Joshua. God keeps his promises. This, of course, is very important for us to hear when God calls us to suffer, when he calls us to make sacrifices for righteousness' sake, and when we know what is the right thing to do, but then wonder if it's worth doing because of the heavy price we will pay for obeying God rather than seeking to please men. Passages like this tell us that the answer to these questions is "yes," it is always worth waiting upon God to keep his promise. Caleb waited forty-five years and endured much, before he finally was given title to the land God had promised him. The same is now true for all of Israel.

In verses 1-2, God now gives to Joshua the same instructions he had given to Moses. *"Then the LORD said to Joshua, 'Say to the people of Israel, 'Appoint the cities of refuge, of which I spoke to you through Moses.'"* As we have seen, all of this has been set out before in Exodus and Numbers. As God has given Israel the land of Canaan and all its cities, the people of Israel are to designate six of these cities for this particular purpose. In this we see an important moral distinction made between "killing" and "murder". Murder is intentional taking of life (premeditated, "with cunning" says Moses) which is not sanctioned by any divine command—such as God's command for Israel's soldiers to slaughter the Canaanites. In this particular case, killing is the accidental taking of life.

The legal definition of manslaughter is given in verse 3. *"The manslayer who strikes any person without intent or unknowingly may flee there. They shall be for you a refuge from the avenger of blood."* According to the law, that one who commits murder is to be put to death—his blood is to be shed. In this, we have the basis for our modern understanding of capital punishment for a capital crime. But in this particular commandment we also find the basis for the modern notions of "manslaughter," or the accidental taking of life. The latter can occur through negligence, in which case a person's action (however unintentional) led to the death of another, or through ignorance, in which case the person did not know that his action was wrong. In both kinds of manslaughter, the person who kills another is guilty, but not of a capital offense—murder. Such people are not to be put to death if they sought refuge. While Jewish law did not allow ignorance as an excuse, it also states that the person whose actions led to the death of another, is presumed to have been able to act in a better, less negligent way. Hence the serious nature of the taking of life, and the need to flee to a "city of refuge."

Taking these important distinctions into account, in Leviticus 4 there is a discussion of how to atone for sins committed unintentionally. Leviticus 5 deals with so-called "hidden sins" (things done in ignorance). Purification offerings (or "sin offerings") could be made in these types of situations so that recompense could be made and so that the offender could be given some relief from their guilt. Now that Israel is dwelling in Canaan the situation changes a bit. If you killed someone inadvertently, you could now flee to one of these designated "cities of refuge" and thereby escape an avenger.

The Hebrew word for avenger is "go-el had-dam" (a "kinsman redeemer") and refers to someone who

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<sup>2</sup> Howard, *Joshua*, 379-381.

had the legal right to make sure that appropriate recompense was made whenever there was a legal obligation to fulfill. These *go-el had-dam* returned stolen property and indentured servants who escaped, and they could even mete out punishment and take life when it was necessary to avenge the death of another. Many of the legal requirements placed on these *go-el* are spelled out in Leviticus 25. The most famous case of such an avenger is the story of Boaz and the kinsman redeemer in the Book of Ruth.<sup>3</sup>

More specific instructions are given by Joshua in verse 4-6. *“He shall flee to one of these cities and shall stand at the entrance of the gate of the city and explain his case to the elders of that city. Then they shall take him into the city and give him a place, and he shall remain with them. And if the avenger of blood pursues him, they shall not give up the manslayer into his hand, because he struck his neighbor unknowingly, and did not hate him in the past. And he shall remain in that city until he has stood before the congregation for judgment, until the death of him who is high priest at the time. Then the manslayer may return to his own town and his own home, to the town from which he fled.”*

There is much more detail given here than in Numbers or Exodus. In the case of manslaughter, the person who committed the act was to flee to one of these cities and then plead his case to the elders of the city. If the elders are convinced that this is indeed the case, the person is to be welcomed into the city, where they are to remain. Meanwhile, the elders were ensure that two things happen. First, they are to protect the person until such time as they can stand trial in their home city. This is spelled out in Numbers 35:24-25. If they are found innocent of murder, but guilty of manslaughter, they are to be returned to the city of refuge. The second thing the elders are to do is to make sure that the person remains in the city until the high priest dies, when the person could then return home with no fear of reprisal.<sup>4</sup> From this it is patently obvious that the person’s legal counsel would advise them to seek out that city of refuge which had the oldest living high priest!

In all seriousness, since there is nothing mentioned about how the manslaughter’s guilt is removed, the fact that the person is to remain in the city of refuge until the high priest dies, most likely means that the death of the high priest (who represents the nation, its guilt and its sacrifices) symbolically terminates the guilt of the one who committed manslaughter.<sup>5</sup> Thus, in a powerful redemptive-historical irony, the death of the high-priest symbolically atones for the guilt of those who have committed manslaughter. Once again, we are pointed forward to the death of Jesus Christ who is not only the consummate and final high-priest, but who is himself the final and once for all sacrifice for sin.

The list of these cities of refuge is given in verses 7-8. *“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. And beyond the Jordan east of Jericho, they appointed Bezer in the wilderness on the tableland, from the tribe of Reuben, and Ramoth in Gilead, from the tribe of Gad, and Golan in Bashan, from the tribe of Manasseh.”* Three of these cities are on the west of the Jordan River, while three are on the eastern side. These cities were picked so as to ensure that no place in Israel was more than a single day’s journey from a “city of refuge.” Despite the importance these cities play in Exodus, Numbers, and now in Joshua, they are never mentioned again in the Old Testament.

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<sup>3</sup> See the very helpful discussion of this in; Howard, *Joshua*, 382-385.

<sup>4</sup> Howard, *Joshua*, 385.

<sup>5</sup> Howard, *Joshua*, 386; Hess, *Joshua*, 278.

Finally then, in verse 9, Joshua gives us a summation of the purpose of these cities, only this time he includes the important information that these cities are also intended for aliens and sojourners in the land. *“These were the cities designated for all the people of Israel and for the stranger sojourning among them, that anyone who killed a person without intent could flee there, so that he might not die by the hand of the avenger of blood, till he stood before the congregation.”* Not only does God graciously give his people relief in those cases where there should be an accidental death, he also extends this provision to include aliens (sojourners) living within Israel. God is merciful to all who call upon his name.

**F**rom all of this, it now should be crystal clear that with the coming of Jesus Christ and the institution of the New Covenant, we have that glorious once for all sacrifice for sin which Joshua could not possibly have envisioned, and of which the high priest’s death is but a symbol.

When we turn to the Book of Hebrews, one of the major themes is the superiority of Christ’s priesthood in comparison to that of the priests of Israel. As we read in verse 1 of Hebrews 10 (our New Testament lesson), *“the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities.”* The fact that someone who took refuge in one of these six cities had to remain there until the priest died is the shadow. The high priest’s death is only a symbol. This is why the law *“can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near.”* The murderer in ancient Israel was put to death for committing a capital offense. That one who committed manslaughter must flee to a city of refuge, or else be subject to death at the hands of an avenger.

But under the New Covenant, all those who trust in Jesus Christ know that the guilt of their sin is forgiven and that they have been made “perfect,” no matter what crime they have committed, and no matter what the state chooses to do them in terms of the legal system. Christ’s death can save the vilest murderer who trusts in him. And by the way, we are all murderers, says Jesus, because if we’ve ever looked at our neighbor with hatred in our hearts it were as though we’d taken their lives.

The Levitical priests in these six cities made perpetual sacrifices. Their death symbolically set manslaughters free. As the author of Hebrews points out, *“otherwise, would they [the sacrifices] not have ceased to be offered, since the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have any consciousness of sins? But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.”* That is why the author goes on to say in verses 10-13, *“and by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.”* Christ is the true high priest. His death perfects and sanctifies those for whom he is dying, and who have trusted in him alone.

Beloved, the reason why there are not cities of refuge, nor animal sacrifices, nor festivals or feast days in the New Covenant is because Jesus Christ is our “city of refuge.” His death saves us from the wrath of God which is to come. That is why when Jesus establishes the New Covenant, the Old Covenant is rendered obsolete. Now that Jesus has come and laid down his life for our sins, that for which Joshua, the priests and the manslaughter had hoped—a full and final sacrifice for sin—is now a glorious reality. This is why we read these wonderful words in Hebrews 10:17, *“I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more.”* Why? Because Jesus Christ is now our blessed refuge and to him we sinners must learn to flee whenever we break God’s law and fall into sin.