**Joshua**

Chapter 20

*Cities of Refuge*

**Then the Lord said to Joshua: 2 “Tell the Israelites to designate the cities of refuge, as I instructed you through Moses, 3 so that anyone who kills a person accidentally and unintentionally may flee there and find protection from the avenger of blood. 4 “When he flees to one of these cities, he is to stand in the entrance of the city gate and state his case before the elders of that city. Then they are to admit him into their city and give him a place to live with them. 5 If the avenger of blood pursues him, they must not surrender the one accused, because he killed his neighbor unintentionally and without malice aforethought. 6 He is to stay in that city until he has stood trial before the assembly and until the death of the high priest who is serving at that time. Then he may go back to his own home in the town from which he fled.” 7 So they set apart Kedesh in Galilee in the hill country of Naphtali, Shechem in the hill country of Ephraim, and Kiriath Arba (that is, Hebron) in the hill country of Judah. 8 On the east side of the Jordan of Jericho they designated Bezer in the desert on the plateau in the tribe of Reuben, Ramoth in Gilead in the tribe of Gad, and Golan in Bashan in the tribe of Manasseh. 9 Any of the Israelites or any alien living among them who killed someone accidentally could flee to these designated cities and not be killed by the avenger of blood prior to standing trial before the assembly.**

**Ch 20** No examples in the OT of anyone making use of the refuge afforded by these cities. We may assume that Israel used this arrangement during times of covenant faithfulness but perhaps ignored it when unfaithful. Even the Passover was neglected for years (2Ki 23:21–23). (tlsb)

**20:1–9** Having distributed the land to the tribes, the Lord’s next administrative regulation (see note on 13:1–32) provided an elementary system of government, specifically a system of regional courts to deal with capital offenses having to do with manslaughter. Thus this most inflammatory of cases was removed from local jurisdiction, and a safeguard was created against the easy miscarriage of justice (with its potential for endless blood feuds) when retribution for manslaughter was left in the hands of family members. The cities chosen were among those also assigned to the Levites, where ideally the law of Moses would especially be known and honored. (CSB)

**20:2** *as I instructed you through Moses.* See Nu 35:6–34. (CSB)

**20:3** *manslayer*. Form of Hbr verb used in the Fifth Commandment, “You shall not murder” (Ex 20:13; Dt 5:17). (TLSB)

*avenger of blood.* Also translated “kinsman-redeemer” (Ru 3:9), or “Redeemer” (Ps 19:14). The avenger was a near relative with the obligation of exacting retribution (see Lev 24:17; Nu 35:16–28). (CSB)

Hbr *go’el*. In other contexts, translated “redeemer” (cf Ru 3:12; Jb 19:25). Life belongs to God, who has authority in issues of life and death. In the OT, He exercised His authority under this arrangement involving an “avenger of blood” (cf Gn 4:10; 9:6; Dt 32:35). Both OT and NT affirm the practice of capital punishment. The high value of each human life under the Creator is affirmed by requiring the payment of the highest price if a life is taken unjustly. Ancient documents attest that avengers existed also in Mesopotamia at the time of Joshua. They exist today in countries with strong tribal identity. (TLSB)

**20:4** *city gate.* Traditional place for trials, where the elders sat to hold court (see Ru 4:1 and note; see also Job 29:7). (CSB)

 *explain his case*. The preliminary hearing; the full trial took place inside the city (v 6). (TLSB)

*elders*. Distinguished from Israel’s “heads,” “judges,” and “officers” (23:2; 24:1). (TLSB)

**20:5** Those who unintentionally kill another have a God-ordained legal right to safety in a city of refuge. (TLSB)

**20:6** *assembly.* Made up of the adult males of the city. Their function in the trial before the elders (v. 4) is not clear, but perhaps they witnessed the trial to see that it was fair (closed courts are notoriously corruptible). (CSB)

*and.* Or “or.” (CSB)

*death of the high priest.* See Nu 35:25–28. Either an atoning effect or a kind of amnesty was achieved by the high priest’s death. (CSB)

The death of the high priest, intercessor for all Israel, evidently restored harmony and signaled the safe release of the manslayer to his former hometown. Death of the OT high priest anticipated the death of the great High Priest, Jesus Christ, whose blood makes full atonement for all. (TLSB)

*the manslayer may return* *to his own town*. Assures safety for the unintentional manslayer. The avenger of blood has no legal right to harm him. (TLSB)

**20:7–8** Lists 6 of the 48 cities the Levites would receive by lot from the inheritance of the other 12 tribes (cf ch 21; Nu 35:1–8). Ultimately, God is the “owner” of these cities and all the tribal allotments (Lv 25:23). The fact that these were Levite cities places a special burden for judgment and justice on the priestly tribe. The locations of these six cities (see map, p 365), no more than c 30 mi from any spot in the land, made it possible for one fleeing to arrive at a city of refuge within hours. The six cities lie in a horseshoe pattern beginning in the northwest and ending in the northeast. (TLSB)

**20:7** *they set apart Kedesh.* A wordplay in the Hebrew: “they consecrated (the town of) consecration.” The other two cities west of the Jordan already had sacred associations: For Shechem see 8:30–35 and note; Ge 12:6–7; for Hebron see Ge 23:2; 49:29–32. The geographical distribution of the cities was important: one in the north, one in the midlands and one in the south. (See v. 8, where the order of the three cities of refuge that served in Transjordan is reversed: Bezer in the south, Ramoth in the midlands and Golan in the north.) See “Cities of Refuge”. (CSB)

Only these three cities are newly appointed here by Joshua. (TLSB)

**20:8** Cf Dt 4:43 for Moses’ earlier appointment of these three cities. (TLSB)

**20:9** *or any alien.* Evidence of the equal protection granted to the foreigners living in Israel (cf. Lev 19:33–34; Dt 10:18–19). (CSB)

Native and nonnative Israelites had equal rights in regard to the safety afforded by the cities of refuge. Cf Ex 22:21; 23:9; Lv 19:33–34; Dt 10:17–19. (TLSB)

 **Ch 20** At the Lord’s direction, Joshua appoints six cities of refuge, demonstrating the Lord’s desire for both justice and mercy. Today, through Jesus’ perfect life and atoning death, our God of grace “is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble” (Ps 46:1). • Dear God of love, “we flee for refuge to Your infinite mercy, seeking and imploring Your grace for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Amen. (*LSB*, p 184) (TLSB)