

## *Chapter 16: A Tale of Two (Types of) Cities (Joshua 20-21)*

As we come to the end of this section of the book— on the inheritance of the Promised Land-- we have two related topics remaining. From Joshua 21, we will briefly discuss the cities where the Levites settled before turning to a very special subset of those cities described in Joshua 20, the ‘cities of refuge’.

### **The Cities of the Levites (Joshua 21)**

Most of this chapter is comprised of a list of family names and the 48 cities that the Levites were given. But there are a few noteworthy verses and this chapter also gives us occasion to review the Levites’ responsibilities to God and their provisions from God. First, note that in a manner similar to Caleb, they aggressively lay claim to what had been promised to them by God (21:1-3). Second, note that they waited until the other tribes had been allotted their land before approaching Joshua for theirs. In a sense, this was purely practical. Because the Levites were only to receive cities and not territory per se<sup>1</sup>, the other tribes had to receive their own land before they could give cities to the Levites. But in another sense, as workers in God’s tabernacle, their ‘putting others first’ is a good picture of the ‘patient spirit’ one would hope to find in God’s servants.

Third, despite the limited allotment to the tribe of Levi, they did receive the offerings of the Israelites to God (13:14), God himself (13:33; Numbers 18:20, Psalm 21:6), and the ‘priestly service’ (18:7a; Numbers 8:15-19) as an amazing part of their inheritance. God did make provision in the Law to care for their physical needs, including even the choice parts of some sacrifices (Deuteronomy 18:1-5). So too, today’s churches are to provide properly for those who serve them as church leaders. (See: e.g., Galatians 6:6, I Timothy 5:17-18.) The Levites were not meant to worry about where their next meal would come from— as Christ encourages His children not to ‘worry about your life, what you will eat or drink, or about your body’ (Matthew 6:25).

The inheritance of the Levites underscores our inheritance today as believers. As with the Levites, our focus is not to be on cities and land-- i.e., our possessions— but on our spiritual blessings in Christ and on our stewardship of the possessions over which God has granted us dominion. Our focus is to be on spiritual rather than worldly things, on eternal rather than temporal things. On earth, we’re ‘just passing through’-- which points to less focus on

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<sup>1</sup> As described in chapter 12, following the events of Genesis 34, this fulfilled the ‘scattering’ prophecy/curse of Jacob in Genesis 49:5-7. Note also that Simeon, Levi’s co-conspirator in Genesis 34, also received just cities (19:1-8), obtaining its inheritance from the land allotted to Judah almost as an afterthought (19:9).

possessions here and points forward to our true possessions ‘at home’. This perspective also encourages us to use what we have been given to glorify the Giver.

Fourth, the general location for the cities was purposefully chosen. These towns were spread out such that one would always be within ten miles of a Levite or priest. In a word, God sprinkled His representatives throughout the entire land– to teach God’s Law and His word, to provide counsel, to defend against pagan worship, and so on.<sup>2</sup>

Malachi 2:6-7 says of faithful priests that “True instruction was in his mouth and nothing false was found on his lips. He walked with me in peace and uprightness, and turned many from sin. For the lips of a priest ought to preserve knowledge, and from his mouth men should seek instruction– because he is the messenger of the Lord Almighty.” For us, as God’s representatives and messengers, II Timothy 4:2 instructs us to “Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke, and encourage– with great patience and careful instruction.” Not all of us are called to be teachers or preachers, but all of us are called to explain God’s word to family and friends.

The priests and Levites were also supposed to offer sacrifices and incense to God. As such, they were a type of Christ-- the fulfillment of both the perfect High Priest and the perfect Sacrifice. Likewise, we are to make offerings and sacrifices to God as well. I Peter 2:5 describes us as “a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ”. Hebrews 13:15 defines worship as one of those sacrifices: “Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise– the fruit of lips that confess his name.” A few verses compare prayer to offerings of burnt incense. For example, in Psalm 141:2, David sings “May my prayer be set before you like incense; may the lifting up of my hands be like the evening sacrifice.”<sup>3</sup> And Paul takes the concept furthest in Romans 12:1: “to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God– this is your spiritual act of worship.”

Finally, for us, the spreading out of the Levite cities is a picture of the ‘Great Commission’ of Matthew 28:18-20 and Acts 1:8– to go into all the world to make disciples– rather than merely sticking together in one place, keeping the light to ourselves. Christ said that his followers ‘are the light of the world’, compared them to ‘a city on a hill’ and a lamp to be put on a lampstand rather than under a bowl, before concluding: ‘In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven’

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<sup>2</sup> See: Deuteronomy 33:10.

<sup>3</sup> See also: Revelation 5:8, 8:3-4.

(Matthew 5:14-16). In Revelation 1:12, John uses the light on a lampstand analogy in describing churches. In contrast, John Stott has described what he calls ‘rabbit-hole Christianity’— when our only contact with the world are our made, brave dashes from one Christian event to another.

### **The Cities of Refuge (Joshua 20)**

Now we reach the climax of the book of Joshua. On the surface, this chapter and its topic would seem to be an unlikely candidate for that distinction, but there will be little doubt about it when we finish. The ‘cities of refuge’ start off inauspiciously enough— they are six of the 48 cities given to the Levites.<sup>4</sup> Their general purpose is to deal with accidental deaths (20:3)— as Matthew Henry put it, ‘...for when hands were guilty, but not hearts’. Deuteronomy 19:4-6 and Numbers 35:22-24 provide some examples of accidental death— a man swinging an ax when the axhead flies off and strikes someone, and dropping a rock on someone unintentionally— and contrasts unintentional and pre-meditated murder. This is an early indication in the Law that motives matter over and above the external cause and effect. Later, Paul would remind us that God will judge us and ‘expose the motives of men’s hearts’ (I Corinthians 4:5).

Of course, with a modern judicial system, we take such distinctions for granted— for example, in distinguishing between murder and manslaughter. We also typically assume that the best place to deal with such events is in a court of law. But in that day, there was another competing institution— the ‘avenger of blood’ (20:3). This colorful phrase provides an apt description of someone who responds to the accidental death with anger and vengeance— even to the point of irrationality. The same Hebrew word is translated more broadly elsewhere as the ‘kinsmen-redeemer’, made most popular by the story of Ruth and Boaz (Ruth 2:20). Under the law, the kinsmen-redeemer had a number of responsibilities to protect his extended family, including the provision of an heir for a dead brother (Deuteronomy 25:5-6), the retrieval of land or a person sold because of poverty (Leviticus 25:25,47-49), and here, the vengeance of a death. Thus, the city of refuge provided a safe haven for those who had accidentally killed someone.

Moreover, given the avenger’s responsibility under the law, the city of refuge ensured quick justice since the avenger would always know where to look! The defendant would ‘state his case’ to the city elders (20:4)— a type of grand jury. If there was enough evidence to go to trial, an ‘assembly’ would be convened to decide the case (20:6). The other noteworthy detail is that the ‘death of the high priest’ acted as a type of a statute of limitations. After that, he was free to return home and the avenger’s license to kill the defendant was revoked.

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<sup>4</sup> The cities are denoted throughout Joshua 21. See also: Numbers 35:6.

Although this is an interesting provision in the law, it would seem to be a triviality in practice. How many axheads are going to fly off the handle and kill someone each year? But interestingly, this arrangement is described in four Old Testament books<sup>5</sup>, implying its importance. And in Deuteronomy 4:41-43, Moses establishes three cities of refuge on the east side of Jordan during the Wilderness period— as if he was in some sort of hurry. (Perhaps this foreshadows the probability of trouble with ‘friendly fire’ in their conquest of Canaan.)

But the importance of these cities of refuge is probably more indirect. First, they illustrate that no innocent blood should be purposefully shed, underlining the sanctity of human life.<sup>6</sup> When Cain murders Abel, God says ‘your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground’ (Genesis 4:10). In God’s covenant, He makes this principle explicit and gives a reason for it: ‘Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man’.<sup>7</sup> Intentional murder, even in vindicating manslaughter, shows contempt for man and God. This also explains the connection to the death of the High Priest— which serves as an atonement of sorts.

Second, this entire arrangement provides a marked contrast to the cultural norm for that time— ‘an eye for an eye’. Today, although petty revenge is common, vendettas and vigilante justice are relatively rare. That said, one can easily see the practical importance of avoiding the continuation or even the escalation of hostilities. Each of us can probably think of at least modest examples of this principle, but more intense disputes can continue to wreak havoc through generations.

P. J. O’Rourke writes about modern day Hatfields and McCoys in Albania.<sup>8</sup> “Albania is remarkable for the number and persistence of its blood feuds. As soon as a boy is of age, he...[has] responsibility for killing members of the clan who killed members of his clan, who killed members of their clan, and so forth— a sort of pyramid scheme of death, if you will.” He continues by citing anthropologists’ estimates that 2% of the country’s population is involved before closing with an example: “In 1992, a man was beheaded with an ax in a Tirana hotel lobby— revenge for a murder his father had committed in a northern village more than forty years before.”

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<sup>5</sup> Exodus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua.

<sup>6</sup> See: Leviticus 24:21.

<sup>7</sup> Genesis 9:6; see also: Numbers 35:33-34.

<sup>8</sup>*Eat the Rich* (Atlantic Monthly Press: New York; 1998), p. 52. See also: Inigo Montoya in the film, *The Princess Bride*

Third, the cities of refuge provide an able portrait of God's character-- in particular, both His justice and His mercy. God's justice is seen in that the person who kills another person unintentionally is not himself to be killed. In fact, in the cities of refuge account in Exodus 21:12-14, such deaths are attributed to God-- that He 'lets it happen'. Given that God allows the death-- for whatever reason-- and it was not done intentionally, why should an 'innocent' man die as a result? In such cases, again, the High Priest's death serves as an atonement. Note also that the innocent man receives some punishment (since he's confined to the city of refuge for a time) which is consistent with the negligence that led to the death-- almost as if he's grounded! Finally, note that the trial would typically not be held in the city where the death occurred, avoiding local politics and bias. And in any case, Jewish law provided for fair trials-- the need for multiple witnesses, exhortations to avoid bribes, and so on.

But in addition to God's judgment, the cities of refuge also model His mercy. In a sense, the one causing the death does deserve punishment, perhaps even death in return. But God provided a shelter against the wrath of the avenger of blood. Likewise, although we didn't deserve it, God sent an atoning sacrifice for our sins as well (I John 4:10).

As such, in the cities of refuge, we see a striking combination of both justice and mercy-- a frequent theme in Scripture. A personal favorite of mine is Malachi 4:1-2-- "Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and that day that is coming will set them on fire, says the Lord Almighty. Not a root or a branch will be left to them. But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings. And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall."<sup>9</sup> But the most fitting verses in this context is probably Joel 3:16-- "The Lord will roar from Zion and thunder from Jerusalem; the earth and the sky will tremble. But the Lord will be a refuge for his people, a stronghold for the people of Israel." In the Law, God provided a refuge against the avenger of blood. And this sets up our final point: God has provided the ultimate refuge for us against the eternal avenger of blood-- in Christ Jesus.

### **Jesus as our City of Refuge**

The reason that chapter 20 is the climax of the book of Joshua is that it points directly to the person of Jesus Christ. First, and most important, Christ is our hope for eternal safety. We too need to be rescued from the avenging angel of death (Exodus 12) and to be saved from the wrath of God toward sin and the eternal judgment of God against that sin. "Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." (Romans 8:1). In developing his case for Christ as the perfect priest and the perfect sacrifice, the writer of

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<sup>9</sup> Isaiah 40:10-11 speaks of God as a powerful judge and as a loving shepherd. See also: Psalm 89:14 and John 1:14b's combination of truth and grace.

Hebrews says that we “have *fled* to take hold of the hope offered to us...We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure.” (6:18b-19a). As Matthew Henry said, “sinners, pursued by the avenging Law which decrees judgment and death, may flee for refuge to Christ.”

In fact, Christ is our *only* possible city of refuge in terms of justification. In John 14:6, Christ said, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” As Peter preached in Acts 4:12, “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.” Or as Paul wrote, “For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men...” (I Timothy 2:3-6). Sadly, many attempt to seek safety in false cities of refuge— in particular, their own works and self-righteousness. But just as a well-intentioned Israelite might run into any city seeking shelter from the avenger of blood, only the cities established by God’s word would provide him refuge.<sup>10</sup>

We should also note that the cities of refuge offered ‘rest’<sup>11</sup> and provision for one’s needs. As such, they also represent sanctification-- the prospects for the abundant Christian life. Just as the cities of refuge had everything a person would need— although not necessarily everything they might want— God gives us all of our necessary provisions. They didn’t have to leave the city for anything— in fact, to do so was dangerous. We too should depend fully on God.

“God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.”<sup>12</sup> But again, false cities of refuge beckon us. Where do we go in times of trouble? Who do we turn to? Too often we turn to things other than God— dependence on self or reliance on vices that provide temporary relief but ultimately make things worse. There is nothing inherently wrong with many of these things, but they are not to be relied on— we should just be ‘passing through’ rather than living in those cities. “O Lord...You are my refuge, my portion in the land of the living.” (Psalm 142:4-5). Or as Paul concludes, “My God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 4:19).<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Cities of refuge provide some (weak) evidence for ‘eternal security’— aside from explicitly rejecting Christ as the atoning sacrifice for one’s sin-- since one could not be dragged outside and would not casually wander outside the safety of the city.

<sup>11</sup> See: Heb 3:8-11, 4:1-2,8-10.

<sup>12</sup> Psalm 46:1.

<sup>13</sup> See also: Isaiah 40:28-31 as well as John 6:51 on justification and John 6:57 on sanctification.

Second, remember that freedom was granted in Joshua 20 through the death of the High Priest. And of course, it is the death of the ultimate High Priest that sets us free from the penalty and power of sin. “Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God.” (Hebrews 10:11-12)

Third, the cities of refuge were easily entered. Roads were built which led to each city of refuge.<sup>14</sup> Tradition tells us that the roads were cleared every spring; the bridges were repaired; and the gates to the city were always open. As noted earlier, they were conveniently located throughout Canaan, spread evenly throughout the land; someone fleeing would have to travel no more than 30 miles to reach safety. And the cities were available to all people—Israelite or alien.<sup>15</sup>

Of course, this is a wonderful picture of God’s plan of salvation for us. It is easy to enter into relationship with God. We’re told that, by his blood, Christ purchased ‘men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation’— that he ‘gave himself as a ransom for all men’.<sup>16</sup> We’re told that Heaven— the New Jerusalem— has three gates each on the north, south, east, and west walls, and that its gates will never shut.<sup>17</sup> Critics often complain that Christianity is an ‘exclusive religion’. But in fact, it is the least exclusive religion because it is based on grace; no works are required to get into Heaven. “To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life.”<sup>18</sup> That said, the cities of refuge required one to go to the city, and implicitly, to trust that the city could, in fact, shelter you from the avenger of death. Likewise, one must accept the gift of grace for it to be operative. As Christ said, “*Come to me*, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest”.<sup>19</sup>

## Conclusion

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<sup>14</sup> Deuteronomy 19:3.

<sup>15</sup> Josh 20:9's "any". See also: I Timothy 2:5-6's "gave himself as a ransom for *all* men", Matthew 11:28's "come to me, *all* you who are weary...")

<sup>16</sup> Revelation 5:9; I Timothy 2:5-6.

<sup>17</sup> Revelation 21:13,25.

<sup>18</sup> Revelation 21:6.

<sup>19</sup> Matthew 11:28.

As we come to the end of the ‘inheritance section’ of the book of Joshua, we return to the final three verses of chapter 21 to reiterate some familiar themes. In verse 43, we see God’s provision and their participation again: ‘the Lord gave Israel all the land...’ and ‘they took possession of it and settled there’. In verse 44, we see Israel granted victory and rest. Note that this follows their exhibitions of faith, their advances against strongholds in their Promised Land. So too with us; rest and victory come after we trust in God and deal with major strongholds in our land. If we fail to do so, ‘unrest’ follows. Finally, in verse 45, this section concludes by reminding Israel and us that God delivered on ‘every one’ of His promises. None of God’s promises ‘failed’, although Israel sometimes failed to accept those promises in faith. The problem is always our faithlessness not God’s faithfulness. Moreover, even with our faithfulness, along with the fruit of our promised lands, there will always be more battles to fight and more land to appropriate— in trust and partnership with God.