

Second Baptist Church of Doylestown
Bible Study Notes
4-26-23

Joshua 20

Cities Of Refuge: A Place Of Refuge From The Avenger Of Blood – Verses 1-3

¹ Then the LORD said to Joshua: ²“Tell the Israelites to designate the cities of refuge, as I instructed you through Moses, ³so that anyone who kills a person accidentally and unintentionally may flee there and find protection from the avenger of blood.

20:1-2 Appoint for yourselves cities of refuge: God now tells Joshua to fulfill what the Lord had commanded through Moses in Numbers 35 — the appointment of six cities of refuge.

20:3 That the slayer who kills a person accidentally or unintentionally may flee there: The purpose of the cities of refuge was to protect the slayer who kills any person accidentally or unintentionally. They were to protect someone in the case of manslaughter as opposed to murder.

20:3 And they shall be your refuge from the avenger of blood: Such a person needed protection against the avenger of blood. The Hebrew word for this phrase is goel, and in this context means the representative from the victim’s family charged with making sure justice is carried out against the murderer of the family member.

20:3 Refuge from the avenger of blood: The avenger of blood tracked down the murderer, and if necessary, delivered him over to the authorities for execution. This was providing the testimony of two or three eyewitnesses could confirm the guilt of the murderer according to Deuteronomy 17:6-7. Since the avenger of blood might set himself against a person guilty of manslaughter (accidental or unintentional killing) instead of murder, the cities of refuge were established to protect the person innocent of murder.

Entrance Into The City Of Refuge – Verse 4

⁴ When they flee to one of these cities, they are to stand in the entrance of the city gate and state their case before the elders of that city. Then the elders are to admit the fugitive into their city and provide a place to live among them.

20:4 And declares his case in the hearing of the elders of that city: According to custom, the elders of the city spent much time at the gates of the city. When someone fleeing from an avenger of blood came to a city of refuge, he stated his case to the elders at the city gates.

20:4 They shall take him into the city as one of them: After explaining the case, the fleeing person could expect to find protection within the walls of the city of refuge, though he would have to stay there, and live in the city, to enjoy that protection.

Protection Against The Avenger Of Blood – Verse 5

⁵ If the avenger of blood comes in pursuit, the elders must not surrender the fugitive, because the fugitive killed their neighbor unintentionally and without malice aforethought.

20:5 They shall not deliver the slayer into his hand: The leaders of a city of refuge were obliged to protect the one who had fled to the city. The avenger of blood had no legal standing to deliver the slayer over to execution. Israel had a sophisticated legal system, with judgments often based on intent and premeditation.

Freedom For The Slayer – Verse 6

6 They are to stay in that city until they have stood trial before the assembly and until the death of the high priest who is serving at that time. Then they may go back to their own home in the town from which they fled.”

20:6 A new nation in a new land needed a new government. Many years earlier God had told Moses how this government should function. One of the tasks God wanted the Israelites to do when they entered the Promised Land was to designate certain cities as “cities of refuge.” These were to be scattered throughout the land. Their purpose was to prevent injustice, especially in cases of revenge. For example, if someone accidentally killed another person, he could flee to a city of refuge where he was safe until he could have a fair trial. The Levites were in charge of these cities. They were to ensure that God’s principles of justice and fairness were kept.

20:6 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: To be protected against the avenger of blood, the slayer had to stay within the walls of the city of refuge until his case was fully heard by the proper authorities, and until the death of the standing high priest.

20:6 Then the slayer may return and come to his own city: After being declared innocent of murder by the proper authorities, and after the death of the standing high priest, the slayer could go back to his home and be protected against the wrath of the avenger of blood.

The Appointment Of Six Cities – Verses 7-8

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** East of the Jordan (on the other side from Jericho) they designated Bezer in the wilderness 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.

20:7-8 So they appointed: On a map, we see that the cities of refuge were well spaced throughout the country. No matter where you were in Israel, you were not very far from a city of refuge. Deuteronomy 19:2-3 tells us that proper roads were to be built and maintained to these cities of refuge. The city was not much good to the slayer if he could not get to it quickly.

The Purpose For The Cities Of Refuge Is Again Stated – Verse 9

9 Any of the Israelites or any foreigner residing 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.

20:9 For all the children of Israel and for the stranger who dwelt among them: The cities of refuge were not only for the benefit of the Israelite but also for the stranger who dwelt among them. God’s justice applied to all without partiality.

20:9 The cities of refuge as a picture of Jesus: The Bible applies this picture of the city of refuge to the believer finding refuge in God on more than one occasion:

Psalm 46:1: God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. More than 15 other times, the Psalms speak of God as our refuge.

Hebrews 6:18: That by two immutable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we might have strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope set before us.

20:9 Points of similarity between the cities of refuge and our refuge in Jesus: Both Jesus and the cities of refuge are within easy reach of the needy person; they are of no use unless someone could get to the place of refuge.

Both Jesus and the cities of refuge are open to all, not just the Israelite; no one needs to fear that they would be turned away from their place of refuge in their time of need.

Both Jesus and the cities of refuge become a place where the one in need can live; you didn't come to a city of refuge in time of need just to look around.

20:9 Both Jesus and the cities of refuge are the only alternative for the one in need; without this specific protection, they will be destroyed. Both Jesus and the cities of refuge provide protection only within their boundaries; to go outside means death. With both Jesus and the cities of refuge, full freedom comes with the death of the High Priest. The cities of refuge only helped the innocent, but the guilty can come to Jesus and find refuge.