

**CITIES OF REFUGE**  
*A High View Of Human Life*  
**Joshua 20:1-9**

When **Israel** was on the **plains of Moab** and still in the wilderness, God was preparing **Moses** to lead **Israel** to possess the **Promised Land**. It was while they were there that God began instructing **Moses** how he was to allot the land to the different tribes. It was also there that He instructed him to establish **cities of refuge**. These cities were to provide a safe haven for *unintentional manslayers* (**Numbers 35:6-34; Deuteronomy 19:1-14**). The fact that these cities are discussed in *four (4) different books of the Old Testament* marks them as being of great importance. It is apparent that God wished to impress on **Israel** the *sanctity of human life*. To put an end to a person's life, even if done unintentionally, is a serious thing, and the **cities of refuge** underscore this emphatically.

Now, **Israel** has been established and is settling as a new nation in the **Promised Land**...the land of **Canaan**. Now they are setting laws to live by...laws dictated by the **Laws of God**.

*“Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord, the people whom He has chosen for His own inheritance.”*

~Psalm 33:12

*“...How blessed are the people whose God is the Lord!”*

~Psalm 144:15b

*“Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a disgrace to any people.”*

~Proverbs 14:34

An illustration of what **Joshua 20** is designed or purposed for:

*“When the Lord your God cuts off the nations, whose land the Lord your God gives you, and you dispossess them and settle in their cities and in their houses, you shall set aside three cities for yourself in the midst of your land, which the Lord your God gives you to possess. You shall prepare the roads for yourself, and divide into three parts the territory of your land which the Lord your God will give you as a possession, so that any manslayer may flee there. Now this is the case of the manslayer who may flee there and live: when he kills his friend unintentionally, not hating him previously...as when a man goes into the forest with his friend to cut wood, and his hand swings the axe to cut down the tree, and the iron head slips off the handle and strikes*

*his friend so that he dies...he may flee to one of these cities and live; otherwise the avenger of blood might pursue the manslayer in the heat of his anger, and overtake him, because the way is long, and take his life, though he was not deserving of death, since he had not hated him previously.”*

~Deuteronomy 19:1-6

**I. THE PURPOSE OF THE CITIES: (vs. 1-2, 9)**...To provide protection until justice was rendered.

**Refuge**...Heb. *miqlat*, describes *a condition of being safe or sheltered from pursuit or danger*. Means to *provide safe shelter*.

This didn't *exonerate* an individual...it only *protected* them until later when they would have to *stand trial* in the community nearest the scene of the crime.

Then the Lord spoke to Joshua, saying, “Speak to the sons of Israel, saying, ‘Designate the cities of refuge, of which I spoke to you through Moses’”...These were the **appointed** cities for all the sons of Israel and for the stranger who sojourns among them, that whoever kills any person unintentionally may flee there, and not die by the hand of the avenger of blood until he stands before the congregation (**vs. 1-2, 9**)...These cities were *appointed by God* for a specific purpose.

*“He who strikes a man so that he dies shall surely 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 you a place to which he may flee.”*

~Exodus 21:12-13

There is a clear distinction made in the Old Testament between *murder* and *involuntary manslaughter*. **Exodus 21** shows how the Bible views *accidental death*. **Exodus 21-22** goes on to establish the *death penalty* for specific offenses, as well as, how to handle other offenses...laws concerning *slaves, personal injury, theft, property, immorality, etc...*

The **cities of refuge** place a *high value on human life*. There was safety found in the security of the **cities of refuge**.

**II. THE PLACEMENT OF THE CITIES: (vs. 2-3)**...Strategic... cities placed where people could quickly reach them. There were **three** on each side of the **Jordan River**.

Speak to the sons of Israel, saying, “Designate the cities of refuge, of which I spoke to you through Moses, that the manslayer who kills any person unintentionally, without premeditation, may flee there, and they shall become your refuge from the avenger of blood” (vs. 2-3)...

In the ancient world *blood revenge* was widely practiced. The moment a person was killed, his *nearest relative* took responsibility for *vengeance*.

**Avenger of blood...**The *next of kin...the closest relative of someone killed*.

This ancient rite of *vendetta* was often handed down from one generation to another so that increasingly larger numbers of innocent people died violently. Because of the *high value* that God puts on *life...the sanctity of life...the need in ancient Israel for the refuge* that these special cities provided is evident.

*“Then you shall select for yourselves cities to be your cities of refuge, that the manslayer who has killed any person unintentionally may flee there.”*

~Numbers 35:11

- All the cities were located on a mountain...easy to see and easy to find.
- The gates were always open...never locked...even at night.
- The cities were within a day’s journey from anywhere.
- Deuteronomy 19...Roads were built for people to be able to get to the cities unhindered.
- Signs were placed to point people to the cities.
- The Jews were required every year to go out and repair the roads...to remove all stumbling blocks that would hinder anyone from getting to the cities.

### III. THE PROTECTION THAT THE CITIES PROVIDED: (vs. 4b-5, 9)

...They shall take him into the city to them and give him a place, so that he may dwell among them. Now if the avenger of blood pursues him, then they shall not deliver the manslayer into his hand, because he struck his neighbor without premeditation and

did not hate him beforehand...These were the appointed cities for all the sons of Israel and for the stranger who sojourns among them, that whoever kills any person unintentionally may flee there, and not die by the hand of the avenger of blood until he stands before the congregation (vs. 4b-5, 9)...

This **protection** was available to everyone...**Israelite** and *stranger* alike.

*“These six cities shall be for refuge for the sons of Israel, and for the alien and for the sojourner among them; that anyone who kills a person unintentionally may flee there.”*

~Numbers 35:15

This protection was provided only in cases of *un-premeditated deaths*. The procedure indicated in **verse 6** required that a person fleeing to one of these cities later had to stand trial in the community nearest the scene of the crime.

### IV. THE PROCESS NECESSARY TO ACCESS THE CITIES: (vs. 4, 6)

Having arrived at the gate of a *refuge city*, the manslayer was to present his case to the *elders of the city*. A *provisional decision* would then be made to grant him *temporary asylum* till a trial could be held in the *presence of the assembly*.

**Four things about the cities of refuge:**

- Run to them.
- Cry out what you did.
- Be received (*willing to enter*) into the city.
- Be released (*be relieved*) of the penalty.

Once in the *city of refuge*...the criteria for judging...

*“Then the congregation shall judge between the slayer and the blood avenger according to these ordinances. The congregation shall deliver the manslayer from the hand of the blood avenger, and the congregation shall restore him to his city of refuge to which he fled; and he shall live in it until the death of the high priest who was anointed with the holy oil. But if the manslayer at any time goes beyond the border of his city of refuge to which he may flee, and the blood avenger finds him outside the border of his*

*city of refuge, and the blood avenger kills the manslayer, he will not be guilty of blood because he should have remained in his city of refuge until the death of the high priest. But after the death of the high priest the manslayer shall return to the land of his possession. These things shall be for a statutory ordinance to you throughout your generations in all your dwellings. If anyone kills a person, the murderer shall be put to death at the evidence of witnesses, but no person shall be put to death on the testimony of one witness. Moreover, you shall not take ransom for the life of a murderer who is guilty of death, but he shall surely be put to death. You shall not take ransom for him who has fled to his city of refuge, that he may return to live in the land before the death of the priest. So you shall not pollute the land in which you are; for blood pollutes the land and no expiation can be made for the land for the blood that is shed on it, except by the blood of him who shed it. You shall not defile the land in which you live, in the midst of which I dwell; for I the Lord am dwelling in the midst of the sons of Israel.’”*

~Numbers 35:24-34

After standing trial for the death of someone...if found *innocent* of premeditated murder, he was returned to the **city of refuge**. After the death of the high priest, he was free to return with impunity (total freedom and liberty) to his home city.

**V. THE PERSON THE CITIES REPRESENT: (vs. 7-8)...**Jesus Christ.

The **cities of refuge** seem to typify Christ to whom sinners, *pursued by the avenging Law* which decrees *judgment* and *death*, may flee for **refuge**. Paul’s frequent expression “**in Christ**” speaks of the *safety* and *security* possessed by every believer.

Israel’s benefit of *sanctuary* reminds believers of **Psalm 46:1**.

*“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.”*

Christ is God’s appointed Savior and refuge...and in Christ Jesus, there is no condemnation.

*“Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”*

~Romans 8:1

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. Beyond the Jordan east of Jericho, they designated Bezer in the wilderness on the plain from the tribe of Reuben, and Ramoth in Gilead from the tribe of Gad, and Golan in Bashan from the tribe of Manasseh (vs. 7-8)...

The three on the west side of the Jordan River:

- **Kadesh**...means to *be made holy*.
- **Shechem**...means to *lay the burden down*. Literally means *shoulder strength*.
- **Kiriath-arba (Hebron)**...means *fellowship*.

The three on the east side of the Jordan River:

- **Bezer**...means *fortress* or *secured*.
- **Ramoth**...means *lifted up...exalted*.
- **Golan**...means *passage...separated for joy*. Ie. A song in your heart.

The writer of **Hebrews** must have had in mind the **cities of refuge** when he wrote that...

*“...we who have taken refuge would have strong encouragement to take hold of the hope set before us.”*

~Hebrews 6:18

Christ is available as Savior to all...**Jew** and **Gentile**.

*“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.”*

~Romans 1:16

*“So, having obtained help from God, I stand to this day testifying both to small and great, stating nothing but what the Prophets and Moses said was going to take place; that the Christ was to suffer, and that by reason of His resurrection from the dead He would be the first to proclaim light both to the Jewish people and to the Gentiles.”*

~Acts 26:22-23

*“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”*

~Galatians 3:28

*“For whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved.”*

~Romans 10:13

#### LESSONS WE CAN LEARN:

- God speaks of the sanctity of life...man only wants to speak of the quality of life. Sanctity of life is preeminent to God. Psalm 139 speaks of God creating, forming, and intimately knowing man.
- Just as there were cities of refuge that one could run to...we have an advocate that we can run to...Jesus Christ.
- The offender wasn't exonerated until the high priest declared him innocent. Our great High Priest has declared those who come to Him exonerated of their guilt through the righteousness of Jesus Christ.