

A Tale of Two Cities

Second in Command: Life of Joshua – Part VII

Joshua 20-21

Introduction

Our study of the chronicles of Israel's history is nearly complete. The book of Joshua will close in just five short chapters. The conquered territory has been divided among the tribes of Israel. The people are in the land. The enemies have trembled and have seen the power of God. Now, rather than close the book of Joshua, God intended several other things to be recorded for our benefit today.

At first reading, the last few chapters of Joshua may appear boring and incidental to the church. However, I think you will discover with me, as we complete this study, that the richest truths have yet to be learned and will come from the last few chapters of Joshua.

Please turn in your Bible to Joshua, chapter 20, and we will begin reading with verse 1.

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,

‘that the manslayer who kills any person unintentionally, without premeditation, may flee there, and they shall become your refuge from the avenger of blood.

‘He shall flee to one of these cities, and shall stand at the entrance of the gate of the city and state his case in the hearing of the elders of that city; and 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.

‘He shall dwell in that city until he stands before the congregation for judgment, until the death of the one who is high priest in those days. Then the manslayer shall return to his own city and to his own house, to the city from which he fled.’”

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.

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.

Now notice the first three verses of the Joshua, chapter 21.

Then the heads of households of the Levites approached Eleazar the priest, and

Joshua the son of Nun, and the heads of households of the tribes of the sons of Israel.

They spoke to them at Shiloh in the land of Canaan, saying, "The Lord commanded through Moses to give us cities to live in, with their pasture lands for our cattle."

So the sons of Israel gave the Levites from their inheritance these cities with their pasture lands, according to the command of the Lord.

Two special classes of cities have been designated by God to be set up in the land in this new society. There were:

- the first class – the cities of legal refuge;
- the second class – the cities of spiritual refuge.

The Cities of Spiritual Refuge

I will first discuss the cities of spiritual refuge that we read about in Joshua chapter 21. All of the events in Joshua 21, if we had taken the time to read them, could be called, "Operation Saturation". It was God's intention to literally, saturate this land with the presence of the Levites. He designates forty-eight cities that will be places of:

- teaching;
- theology;
- counseling and advice;
- preaching and worship.

The Levites would be the teachers, the storytellers, the counselors, and the preachers in the land. These cities would be the centers of that kind of spiritual refuge.

It has been estimated that no one in the land would live more than ten miles from one of these cities of spiritual refuge. That means there was available to every Israelite, at least one man who was versed in the law and was capable of teaching, preaching, counseling, and advising.

These cities were evidently, very important to the people. In fact, note again in Joshua 21:2-3, the indication that the people had time to forget this command from God to Moses and to rethink it. Then, when the sons of Aaron and the priestly men, who will now serve as teachers, and preachers, and advisors, come and ask, the people, without any hesitation, give the forty-eight cities and their accompanying pasture

land. In other words, the people gave generously to the Levites.

This was a credit to the Israelite people because it allowed the presence of God's word to exist in the land. It also allowed all of the people in the land to have ready access to people who could help them.

These cities were places of spiritual refuge. As I read the passage, I was marked by the generosity of the people who allowed the Levites to live as comfortably as anyone could live in the new land.

The church today, ladies and gentlemen, must take a similar stand to the one of these people, which is an example to us. It is a credit to any church to take care of its pastors, its staff, its global staff; that is, its missionaries, who serve and represent the church. This should not be done with the question, "How little can we give?" but, "How much can we give?"

One of the reasons I believe, by the way, that God is so uniquely blessing our church is that we have this position of generosity. Recently, a missionary family came through this area and visited our church. Afterwards, they wrote a note of thanks to the church. In their note, they mentioned how much their daughter enjoyed the Jacuzzi in the hotel.

You might ask, "Jacuzzi? Where did they stay?"

"The Marriott Courtyard."

"Marriott Courtyard? For half that price, they could have stayed at the Best Western."

I will answer that with a question, "Where would we rather stay?"

While in college, I was a member of a group that had the privilege of representing the university I attended. We visited more than one hundred fifty churches. In the process, I received the best education on how *not* to treat a servant of the Lord. The selfishness of the average church, ladies and gentlemen, is appalling. When we would find out from these churches that they were not going to put us up in homes, but were going to put us up in a motel, we would hold our breath. The motels usually had names like, "The Final Resting Place" or "The Trucker's Paradise".

I will never forget ministering in a church in South Carolina – one of the largest independent Baptist churches there. That evening we ministered to more than two thousand people. When we finished, the senior pastor handed an envelope to us with a check. He said, "I wish it could be more."

We replied, “Oh, we’re sure it’s enough to cover our expenses.”

We shook hands and left. We got into our van, traveled down the road, opened the envelope, and therein was a check for sixty-seven dollars and some odd cents. I wish I could tell you that this was the exception, but it was not.

I talked to a missionary couple, some months ago, who told me about the missionary barrels they receive while on the field, from churches in the states. They said they received a barrel from one particular church and they never even bothered to open it. Instead, they put it in their closet until Halloween. Then, they pulled it out and used the clothing. I will never forget these missionaries telling me, with no animosity in their voices, “The clothing that church sent to us made fantastic costumes.”

I remember, as a kid, receiving a Christmas gift from a church every year. I appreciated that, by the way, because most churches do not do that. It was a church that supported my missionary parents, and they would send my brothers and I the same thing every year, basically. There was usually a kind of stocking stuffer and such things as a comb and a pencil and pen set, and maybe a pair of socks, and always, some penny candy. I did not think about it then, but now I will mention the fact that the church sent those gifts in used half gallon milk cartons. Was a box too much? Was pretty Christmas wrapping too costly for missionary kids?

The missionaries serving in Japan that our church is supporting were absolutely amazed at the generous attitude of this church when they came and spent a weekend here. I will never forget dropping them off at the hotel where they were staying – he looked at me and said, “We have *never* been treated like this. In fact, I don’t believe my wife and I have stayed in a nicer hotel since our honeymoon!”

Our missionaries who are going to El Salvador, told me before they left, “You have treated us more royally than any other church we have ever been in. You have treated us like a king and queen.”

We are not competing, but I get calls nearly every week from missionaries who have heard about us. They say, “I have heard about your church and I need support, too. Can I come?”

How do we treat the Levites? How do we treat those who have sacrificed their lives to serve on the front lines? My friend, by God’s grace, we will never

use old milk cartons, we will never send twenty year old, tattered clothing. We will serve by the axiom of Joshua 21 – not “How little can we give and still be reasonable?” but, “How much can we give and be generous?”

There are three principles in this chapter that still exist today. They are the principles of:

- generosity;
- urgency;
- honor.

The Cities of Legal Refuge

Now I will discuss the other special class of city that we read about in Joshua chapter 20. Joshua 20:2-3 indicate the next class of city.

... 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.

We know from scripture that six cities, on both sides of the Jordan, were set aside as cities of refuge. Four Old Testament books, in fact, discuss these cities of refuge, which gives us a strong implication that they were very important in this new society.

Turn to Deuteronomy 19 for a further explanation of these cities. We will begin with verse 2-3.

you shall set aside three cities for yourself in the midst of your land . . . 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.”

We will learn, later in the text, that three more cities of refuge are added, making a total of six. Continue to Deuteronomy 19:4-6.

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.

A question that might come to your mind is, “What about the person who is guilty?”

In the land of Canaan, there were temples of the pagan gods that would give sanctuary to known criminals. Is that what they are setting up in Israel, as well?

Look at Deuteronomy 19:11-12.

But if there is a man who hates his neighbor and lies in wait for him and rises up against him and strikes him so that he dies, and he flees to one of these cities, then the elders of his city shall send and take him from there and deliver him into the hand of the avenger of blood, that he may die.

Now, the avenger of blood was someone appointed by the family, or tribe, or clan of the victim. That avenger was to track down the killer. It was not his purpose to decide intentional killing or unintentional (manslaughter), he was to revenge the family of that bloodshed. It was not as much revenge, as it was retribution in this system of early, and somewhat primitive, law.

The killer had one hope – he had to make it to the city of refuge before he was caught. If he could make it there, he, completely out of breath, would present his case to the elders of the city. The elders would then, hold a trial. If the killer was innocent, he could live in that city in safety. If he was guilty, he would be handed over to the avenger of blood.

Now, as I read this passage, I was moved by the similarities between the cities of refuge and Jesus Christ. There are differences, as well. I will take the remainder of our discussion to cover several points on this.

1. Number one, the cities of refuge were appointed by God Himself; they were not determined by the Israelite.

In the same way that God would determine the city of refuge; safety for the person hunted by the avenger, He chose His Son, before the foundation of the world, and appointed Him to die to be the refuge for all mankind; for all who would flee to Him.

2. Number two, the cities of refuge would provide safety from the avenger.

I can imagine in that day, a man running for his life. He would be constantly looking over his shoulder for the avenger of blood. He would be trying to make it – not stopping to eat or sleep. He would be completely out of breath, running for his life.

My friend, everyone who runs to Jesus Christ is running for his life. This is the person who has set aside any illusions of safety and recognizes that he is indeed, hunted. He runs to the city of refuge – who is Christ. All the while, the avenger, that roaring lion, is seeking to devour his soul.

3. Number three, it was the duty of the Jew to clearly indicate the way to the cities of refuge.

Deuteronomy 19 tells us that the Israelites were to build roads that led to the cities of refuge. That was not commanded for any other city in the land, but the city of refuge must have a road. Why? To make it as easy as possible for the person to make it.

We learn from historical, extra-biblical sources that the Israelites were to cover ravines with bridges; they were to build bridges so that the hunted one could take the shortest possible route to the city.

I learned in my research, as well, that at every major crossroad, there had to be a sign pointing the way to the city. When the running person would come to a crossroad, there would be a sign fashioned to point in the direction of the city of refuge, and there would be one word on the sign – “Refuge”. It was stated, as well, that these signs had to be so large that a person running at full speed would not miss it; would see it and see the word “Refuge”.

I also learned that many of the cities of refuge would post runners along the way. When these runners saw a hunted one running toward the city, they would run alongside and guide and encourage. The runner would say, “Run this way. Run with me and I’ll take you there.”

Ladies and gentlemen, can you see the awesome responsibility that is paralleling ours today? We build signposts for people, we run alongside, we point the way, we make it easy, we build roads that say, “Run for your life. Jesus Christ is safety. Run there and I’ll take you.”

4. Number four, the doors to the cities of refuge were never to be locked.

I love this thought. Understand that this is very unusual in these days because at night, all the gates were always locked. This protected the residents from

robbers, from raids, from harm. The gates to the cities of refuge, however, were never locked.

Furthermore, in times of war, the cities locked their massive gates that were clad with iron. However, even in times of war, the cities of refuge were told they could never lock their gates.

This gives me a couple of ideas.

- First, it lets me know that just as Jesus is always available, so those who serve Him should always be available to point the way.
 - Second, it also lets me know that the people who lived in the cities of refuge, lived at the risk of their own lives. It would be similar to you sleeping in your home at night with your front door wide open. The residents were willing to be at risk for the safety of one lone person, who may be running at that very moment, in the darkness of the night, for his life. I wonder what we risk today for the cause of Jesus Christ?
5. Number five, the cities of refuge were to be located at high places.

It is interesting that these cities were required to be built on hillsides or on mountaintops. Why? So that they could easily be seen.

Do you get the idea that these cities of refuge were available; were accessible? I wonder if Jesus Christ had that very thought in mind when He encouraged His disciples to be like a city set high on a hill. It is a fascinating thought that we, in a sense, could represent a city of refuge, as we point the way to our Lord and Savior.

6. Number six, the cities of refuge were available to anyone.

It would be easy to miss this, as we read the text in Joshua, Deuteronomy, and in Numbers 35, but the cities of refuge were not just available for the Israelite, but also for the Gentile. Anyone could run and find safety and protection in the cities of refuge.

In the same way today, the gospel is for anyone – Gentile or Jew; black or white; rich or poor; educated or uneducated; advantaged or disadvantaged. Jesus Christ made it very clear when He said, “Whosoever . . . *Whosoever* . . . may come.”

Hebrews 6:18 talks about those who,

. . . have fled for refuge . . . take hold of the hope set before [them].

My friend, I want to make very clear today, that if you are without Jesus Christ, you are not safe. If you are without Jesus Christ today, you need to understand that there is someone hunting your soul. The avenger is none other than Lucifer. And he carries in his hand the most powerful weapon known to men – death. In fact, it is so powerful that it always touches everyone. And, if Jesus Christ does not return and take His church, then everyone in this room will experience death. As we are told,

. . . the wages of sin is death . . . (Romans 6:23a)

The only hope, my friend, is for you to run to the city of refuge and run to that person; that God-man, who took the sting out of death; who took the victory from the grave; who took the most powerful weapon that the avenger had and crushed it, so that you could have safety forever.

If you are without Jesus Christ, my friend, you are hunted. I pray that you will not become another victim of the avenger.

I love to tell the story of the legend of the servant of a very wealthy Arabian chieftain. He went to market one day, and was buying supplies for his clan. The servant rounded a corner and headed down a dark alleyway and came face to face with a hooded being. He recognized that it was death.

The servant ran as fast as he could. He ran back to the chieftain and begged, “Please, I saw death and I knew that death had come for me. I must flee! May I have the most powerful stallion that you have, so I can flee?”

He did flee. He left Baghdad and fled to Samara. The chieftain had to pick up where his servant left off, so he went to the market place. He also turned down the same alley and also came face to face with the hooded being, death. The chieftain knew that it was not his time, so he said to death, “Why is it that you have frightened my servant so? You have startled him. Why?”

Death responded, “Frankly, it was I who was startled. I did not understand why he was in Baghdad, because tonight, I have an appointment with him in Samara.”

Hebrews 9:27 says,

. . . it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment,

Are you safe? *Are you safe?*

Let us pray.

Our Father, we are thankful beyond words for the safety, the forgiveness, the peace that we have found in our city of refuge – Jesus Christ. Though once hunted by that roaring lion, we are forever safe. We have come to the city by way of its door – the cross – and we have asked forgiveness. Now we are safely in.

I pray, O Father, for that person who may at this very hour, not be safe. I pray for them to recognize the horror of the hunt; recognize the certainty of death; to put off any illusion of safety and recognize that they must leave everything and run for their lives – run to You.

My friend, if this sermon has been for you; if the second part of our discussion today has dealt with you, who are being hunted; who are apart from Jesus Christ – you are not safe; you have not come to Him. This very moment, my dear friend, you can invite

Jesus Christ into your life. You can do this now. You do not have to sign a card, join the church, get baptized – all you have to do is run to Jesus Christ and say, “Lord, I recognize that I need You as my Savior. I know that I am a sinner. I cannot save myself. I want You to save me now.”

My friend, if this has been your prayer, I want you to know, on the authority of scripture, that you are now safe. I want you to know, as well, that if you prayed something like this, that the desire of this entire church is to see you grow. We would want to personally disciple you with people in this church who know the Lord and have walked with Him. Please let us know you have prayed this prayer today.

Father, we do pray that everyone who hears this, will walk away as part of the family of God. Thank you that our hope is secure in Christ. In Jesus name, we thank you. Amen.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 1/12/1992 by Stephen Davey.

© Copyright 1992 Stephen Davey

All rights reserved.