

Joshua

The LORD is Salvation

Chapter 20 *The Cities of Refuge and the Avenger of Blood*

20:1-3 The LORD commanded Joshua to follow His instructions to Moses concerning the “cities of refuge”, where a person who killed someone would flee from the “avenger of blood” ^{Numbers 35:12}.

20:4-6 When someone was killed, the killer fled to the nearest city of refuge and gave testimony to the elders at the city gates, who took the person into protective custody. Within a short time, the killer was tried in front of an “assembly” (adult males in the city) to decide whether the killing was murder (malicious/intentional ^{Numbers 35:16-21}) or accidental/unintentional ^{Numbers 35:22-25}. The person who committed an accidental killing had to stay in the city of refuge until the current high priest died. At the time of his death, the slayer was free to return to his home without fear.

Cities of Refuge information from other Biblical text ^{Numbers 35:6-34, Deuteronomy 4:41-43, 19:1-13}:

- The cities were to be “centrally located” ^{Deuteronomy 19:2}, for quick and easy access.
- There were to be many good roads leading to the cities of refuge. ^{Deuteronomy 19:3}
- Whether a person killed intentionally or accidentally, the avenger of blood had the right to kill them if he caught the killer before he reached a city of refuge. ^{Deuteronomy 19:6}
- Once the killer reached a city of refuge and was accepted by the city elders, an assembly of city males would “judge between him and the avenger of blood” ^{Numbers 35:24}. A murder conviction required the testimony of at least two witnesses ^{Numbers 35:30}.
- When a person was found guilty of intentional murder, he was turned over to the avenger of blood, who would exact the punishment of death. ^{Numbers 35:19-21, Deuteronomy 19:11-13}
- If the assembly decided the death was accidental, the killer would be safe, but must stay in the city of refuge until the high priest died. ^{Numbers 35:28} However, if he left the city prior to that time, the avenger of blood had the right to kill him. ^{Numbers 35:26-27}
- No one could replace the punishment of death with a ransom for either a murderer or an accidental killer who left the city of refuge before the high priest died. ^{Numbers 35:31-32}
- If the legal requirements ^{Numbers 35:29} were violated, the land was defiled ^{Numbers 35:33-34}.

The Hebrew word, *Gaal*, translated “avenger” in “avenger of blood” ^{Joshua 20:3}, is also used to mean “kinsman-redeemer” for Naomi ^{Ruth 3:9, etc}, God as the “Redeemer” for Job ^{Job 19:25}, “redeemer” for Israel ^{Isaiah 43:1} and “avenger” of blood for Israel ^{Deuteronomy 32:43}. The Greek equivalent, *ekdikeo*, is used for the “avenger” of blood for all believers ^{Revelation 6:10, 19:2}.

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Is there a NT/Church Age application of these principles? Yes: we deserve death, because of our sins ^{Romans 6:23}, and our sins resulted in the death of Jesus ^{1 Peter 3:18}. However, Jesus said His killing was committed by people who did not know what they were doing ^{Luke 23:34} (i.e., it was not premeditated murder). God is the avenger ^{Deuteronomy 32:35}, but Jesus is the refuge ^{2 Timothy 1:10}. Since the high priest has died ^{Hebrews 7:26-27}, believers are free.

20:7-8 God directed that six would be the number of the cities of refuge ^{Numbers 25:6,13}: three in Canaan ^{Deuteronomy 19:1-2} (Kedesh ⇒ sanctuary ^{Jeremiah 17:12}, Shechem ⇒ shoulder ^{John 21:15-17}, Hebron ⇒ community ^{Jeremiah 30:20}) and three east of the Jordan River ^{Deuteronomy 4:41-43} (Bezer ⇒ fortress ^{Jeremiah 16:19}, Ramoth Gilead ⇒ Gilead heights ^{Habakkuk 3:19}, Golan ⇒ exile ^{1 Peter 2:11}).

20:9 An indication of God's grace (but a bit of a surprise) is found in His equal protection granted to aliens (foreigners/Gentiles) who lived among the Israelites. So, both Israelites and the aliens could utilize the protection of the cities of refuge when a killing was accidental. ^{Numbers 35:15}

Chapter 21 *The Towns and Pasturelands given to the Levites*

21:1-2 The Levite family heads approached Eleazar, Joshua and the tribal heads who had been allotting the inherited land to all of the other tribes. They demanded the towns and pasturelands that they had been promised by God through Moses ^{Numbers 35:1-8, Leviticus 25:32-34}.

Eleazar was the son of Aaron ^{Exodus 6:23}, and was appointed by God as Aaron's successor. Following the ten spies giving the fearful report about the land/people and the rebellion of the Israelites, resulting in God determining that all of their generation would die (except Joshua and Caleb ^{Numbers 13-14}), the Israelites left Kadesh Barnea on their 38-year journey, by heading northeast to Mt. Hor. On top of Mt. Hor, God directed Moses to give Aaron's garments to Eleazar, signifying the transfer of responsibility ^{Numbers 20:22-26}, and told them Aaron would die on Mt. Hor, because of his and Moses' rebellion at Meribah ^{Numbers 20:1-13}.

The Levites knew they would not receive an inheritance of land, because their inheritance was the LORD ^{Deuteronomy 10:9}, and the Israelites did not own their inheritances ^{Leviticus 25:23}. To keep their inheritance, Israel was required to remain obedient ^{Leviticus 26, Deuteronomy 27-30} to God ^{see Chapter 13-14 notes}. The obedience of the Levites was to be their spiritual ministry to the Israelites, and they could do that best by living in towns spread throughout the PL.

God defined the total number of towns and pasturelands the Levites were to receive to be forty-eight ^{Numbers 35:7}, with six of the forty-eight being the cities of refuge ^{Numbers 35:6,13}. And, the towns were to be given in "proportion to the inheritance of each tribe". ^{Numbers 35:8}

21:3 The Israelite leaders obediently followed God's command by giving towns and pasturelands to the Levites out of the inheritances of all of the tribes. The rest of this chapter lists the towns.

The Bible has two listings of the towns allocated to the Levites ^{Joshua 21 & 1 Chronicles 6:54-81}. The differences in the two lists are attributed to changes in the town names over time.

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21:4-5 The distribution of the towns started with the descendants of Kohath. These verses indicate that Aaron (and therefore Moses) was a Kohathite. Aaron's descendants were given the thirteen Levitical towns closest to Jerusalem (in Judah, Simeon & Benjamin) and the rest of the Kohathites were given ten towns to the north and west (in Ephraim, Dan & half of Manasseh).

Levi, the son of Jacob and Leah ^{Genesis 29:34}, had three sons ^{Genesis 6:16, Numbers 3:17}: Gershon, Kohath and Merari. Gershon was the firstborn; however, in addition to the descendants of Kohath receiving the first allotment of towns, they had been given the honor of being responsible for the care and movement of the sanctuary ^{Numbers 3:28b} (the Tent of Meeting and later the Temple) and the holy things ^{Numbers 3:31} (the ark, the table, the lampstand, the altars, the articles of the sanctuary used in ministering, the curtain, and everything related to their use). God assigned secondary support responsibilities to the descendants of Gershon and Merari ^{Numbers 7:6-9}. This seems to be another example of the second birth having prominence (God's favor) over the first birth. ^{see Chapter 13-14 notes}

21:6-7 The Gershonites were allotted thirteen towns (in Issachar, Asher, Naphtali & half-tribe of Manasseh), and the Merarites received twelve towns (in Reuben, Gad & Zebulun).

21:8 This verse is a reiteration of the obedience of the Israelites in giving the forty-eight towns and pasturelands to the Levites, just as God had commanded through Moses. ^{Numbers 35:1-8}

Note, the descendants of Levi's three sons each received two of the cities of refuge. ^{v.9-40}

21:9-19 These verses detail the names of the thirteen towns allotted to Aaron's descendants. The towns included Hebron (a city of refuge), but not the surrounding fields and villages ^{v.12}, because they were given to Caleb ^{Joshua 15:13}. Another assigned town was Debir, that Othniel (Caleb's nephew) had conquered, allowing him to marry Caleb's daughter, Acsah. ^{Joshua 15:15-17}

21:20-26 The ten towns given to the other Kohathites included Shechem (a city of refuge).

21:27-33 The Gershonites were given thirteen towns (Golan and Kedesh were the cities of refuge).

21:34-40 The 12 towns given to the Merarites included Bezer and Ramoth in Gilead (refuge cities).

21:41-42 These verses are another example of repetition for emphasis: the Levites were given the forty eight towns, plus the surrounding pasturelands from the inheritance of the Israelites.

21:43-45 This text is a summary/reiteration to drive home the point that the LORD always lives up to His promises to all who are His (here: His promise to Abram about the land ^{Genesis 15:18-21}). While complete control of the land was still unfinished ^{Joshua 23:4-5, Judges 1-2} (not God's fault), the domination over the Promised Land had been established through the national campaign.

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