



Cities of Refuge and Cities for the Levites Joshua 20-21

Introduction

Now that the land of Canaan had been divided and distributed to the twelve tribes, Israel would be able to settle and become an established nation. They could now practice all the laws and statutes given by God to Moses on Mount Sinai. While wandering in the wilderness, they had kept as many laws as they were able, and to that extent Israel was already a theocracy. Settled in their land, however, they could fully live out God's Law as a witness to other nations and reap God's promised blessings.

God gave Israel the lands of the Gentiles *that they might observe His statutes and keep His laws* (Psalm 105:44-45). The entire world would see and be able to compare their pagan ways to Israel's godly lifestyle. This was intended to lead pagan peoples to worship the God of Israel as their one true Creator God. This purpose invested every Jewish institution and individual with evangelistic significance.

Outline of Joshua 20-21

- I. Cities of Refuge - Joshua 20:1-9
- II. Cities of the Levites - Joshua 21:1-42
- III. Continuing Faithfulness of God - Joshua 21:43-45

I. Cities of Refuge - Joshua 20:1-9

A. The Six Cities

The LORD also spoke to Joshua saying, "Speak to the children of Israel, saying: Appoint for yourselves cities of refuge, of which I spoke to you through Moses." According to the command of Moses, six cities were appointed as cities of refuge.

- West of Jordan - Kedesh, Shechem, and Hebron
- East of Jordan - Bezer, Ramoth, and Golan

These six cities were among the forty-eight given to the Levites (Numbers 35:6-7). They were provided as a merciful provision to protect those who had killed a person "*accidentally or unintentionally*" (Joshua 20:3). "Many a good person would have died if it had not been for those havens." (Explore the Book, J. Sidlow Baxter.)

From this we learn that God differentiates between sins and accidents. He is the righteous Judge who alone knows all the circumstances and details of each

person's life. Someone may be innocent in motive while bumbling in action. Let us be slow to judge and swift to show mercy.

As J. Sidlow Baxter wrote, "Even when we are 'in the land' we may do many things that are wrong without realizing they are wrong. In strict justice the law of God cannot but pursue us as guilty. Yet there is provision made for this in the blood of Christ. Innocent mistakes, inadvertences, 'sins of ignorance', unintentional wrongs, are provided for in the atonement. Christ Himself is our 'City of Refuge' and in Him we are protected and covered so that maintaining the faith-life in our spiritual Canaan is made possible. See in this the protection of faith."

B. Analogy of Physical Refuge to Spiritual Refuge

1. Similar to analogy of Joshua to Ephesians

We have said that Joshua and Ephesians are counterparts. Joshua is the historical account of the physical possession of the Promised Land while Ephesians is the exposition of the doctrine of our spiritual possessions in Christ. "In a sense, Joshua is to the Old Testament what Ephesians is to the New Testament. Canaan was to the Israelite what 'the heavenly places' (Ephesians 1:3) are to the Christian - not a figure of heaven, but an experience here and now of conflict and victory through God's manifested power (Ephesians 6:10-20)" (Survey of the Bible, Merrill F. Unger).

2. Christ our refuge

The Cities of Refuge are a picture of Christ as the refuge for the believer. Child of God, how often have you erred unintentionally? How many mistakes have you made that could have had frightening consequences, even death-threatening ones? Yet the results that could have occurred did not. Christ took the sting of them on the cross and you, as the object of God's mercy, covered by the blood of Christ, were spared. Deliberate sin committed by the child of God is another matter. In that case, God may allow consequences as discipline for the future, even though the sin is forgiven in Christ.

In either case, Christ is our Refuge, whether we are fleeing the results of our unintentional errors or our deliberate sins. *A bruised reed He will not break, and smoking flax He will not quench* (Matthew 12:20). He will be your Refuge to allow you to lick your wounds and heal. As someone has said, "God is more interested

in our restoration than in our condemnation.” Only in Christ can our restoration become a reality. Will you flee to Him for restoration today?

C. Purpose of the Cities of Refuge

1. Sanctuary

Charles Pfeiffer clearly explains the purpose of the cities of refuge. “The city of refuge was a sanctuary for one who had committed unintentional homicide. The fugitive had to justify his claim to protection by convincing the elders of the city of refuge that he did not have murderous intent. If he persuaded them of his innocence, he stayed in the city of refuge until his trial in his own city. If acquitted there, he was permitted to return to the city of refuge where he would be safe until the death of the high priest, at which time he might safely return home.

“The institution of the city of refuge was a check on the ancient custom of blood revenge, according to which the avenging of the victim was assumed by the kinsmen of the slain man. No distinction was made between willful murder and accidental homicide. The cities of refuge, however, did recognize a difference, and provided protection for those innocent of murderous intent. Joshua and Eleazar appointed three such cities in west Palestine which, with the three previously designated in the east, provided easy access from all parts of the land. The ‘stranger’ as well as the native Israelite might flee to these cities” (The Biblical Expositor, Volume I).

These were the cities appointed for all the children of Israel and for the stranger who dwelt among them, that whoever killed a person accidentally might flee there, and not die by the hand of the avenger of blood until he stood before the congregation (Joshua 20:9).

2. Foundation for current concept

It is interesting that the concept of sanctuary, or refuge, has endured for three thousand years to the present day. The church has now replaced the city, making the connection between the physical and the spiritual. In 1989, as this lesson was being written, the notorious drug-dealing dictator of Panama, Manuel Noriega, had surprisingly taken refuge in the papal embassy in Panama City to avoid apprehension or execution. In that same year, Nadia Comeneci, the Romanian Olympic champion gymnast, was granted sanctuary in the United States. In the year 2014, sixty-nine thousand, nine hundred and eighty-seven foreign refugees were granted assylum in the United States. All of these could thank the Mosaic Law and the mercy of God for their protection.

II. Cities of the Levites - Joshua 21:1-42

A. Request of the Levites for Dwelling Places - Joshua 21:1-3

The Levites had received no land. Even though the LORD was their inheritance, and they did not receive territorial inheritance, God had not overlooked their needs for their families and possessions. Therefore, the heads of the three Levite families approached the designated heads of the nation, Joshua, Eleazar, and the tribal elders, making formal request.

1. The LORD's commanded through Moses - 21:2

As Francis Schaeffer wrote, “Once more we are reminded that these people regarded the Pentateuch as normative...as the Word of God and as something which not only conveyed some sort of religious feeling but also gave specific commands which were to be obeyed in detail” (Joshua and the Flow of Biblical History). They referred to the LORD’s words to Moses, “*Command the children of Israel that they give the Levites cities to dwell in from the inheritance of their possession, and you shall also give the Levites common-land around the cities*” (Numbers 35:2). Without the authority of the Word of God we are left to the whim of man, or to the tyranny of the majority, the fifty-one percent.

Do you take the Bible as literally authoritative and normative for your life?

2. Fulfillment of request - 21:3

So the children of Israel gave to the Levites from their inheritance, at the commandment of the LORD, these cities and their common lands. Having received their inheritances, would they have done so if God had not commanded it?

B. Distribution of Cities to the Three Levite Families – Joshua 21:4-41

Jacob’s son, Levi, had three sons; Gershon, Kohath, and Merari (Genesis 46:11). As in the distribution of land to the other eleven tribes, the assignments were made by lot.

1. Cities given to the Kohathites - 21:4-5

The Kohathites received the first lot. Aaron, the high priest, and Moses, were Kohathites. Did the lot fall by coincidence or Divine design?

Aaron’s descendants received thirteen cities selected by lot within the tribes of Judah, Simeon, and Benjamin, the southern tribes west of the Jordan.

The other Kohathite descendants received ten cities by lot within the tribes of Ephraim, Dan, and the half-tribe of Manasseh. These were centrally located between the southern and northern tribes. Among the cities received by Aaron's descendants were two cities of refuge: Hebron in Judah and Shechem in Ephraim.

2. Cities given to the Gershonites - Joshua 21:6

The descendants of Gershon received thirteen cities by lot within Issachar, Asher, Naphtali, and the eastern half-tribe of Manasseh in Bashan across the Jordan.

Gershonite cities included two cities of refuge, Golan in Bashan and Kedesh in Galilee.

3. Cities given to the Merarites - 21:7

The descendants of Merari received twelve cities by lot within the tribe of Zebulun and the eastern tribes of Reuben and Gad, east of the Jordan. The cities of refuge given to the Merarites were Ramoth in Gilead and Bezer.

C. Surrounding Lands - Joshua 21:42

Every one of these cities had its common-land surrounding it. This was a farm-belt for growing crops and raising flocks and herds.

D. Distribution of Levites

The effect of allotting the Levites certain cities within each tribe's inheritance was to disburse them throughout the land of Israel on both sides of the Jordan. Thus each tribe had its representative resident priests and Levites. In this we see the final blessings of Jacob (Genesis 49) and Moses (Deuteronomy 33) come together for a purpose. Jacob had proclaimed that Levi would be divided and scattered (Genesis 49:7) and Moses had prophesied "*They [Levi] shall teach Jacob Your judgments, and Israel Your law*" (Deuteronomy 33:10).

One cannot help but think of Jesus' saying that believers, God's servants and priests in this age, are to be salt and light, sprinkled and scattered abroad, flavoring and permeating every sector of society (Matthew 5:13-14).

III. Continuing Faithfulness of God - Joshua 21:43-45

A. God Given - Joshua 21:43

So the LORD gave to Israel all the land of which He had sworn to give to their fathers, and they took possession of it and dwelt in it.

Every tribe now had their allotment, twelve portions of inheritance to twelve tribes and the cities to the Levites, including the cities of refuge. The earth belongs to God as Creator to give to whomever He wishes. He designated that crucial little strip of land for the children of Israel, the descendants of Jacob, who believed His promises.

Twice the Jews have occupied the land and twice they have been removed from it. The first exile was for seventy years in Babylon for the sin of idolatry. The second time they were scattered among the nations for two thousand years for the sin of rejection of Jesus Christ as their Messiah. Now they occupy the land for the third time having fought for it in 1948, and again in 1967, as strenuously as they did under Joshua. They continue to fight to defend their land today.

As the LORD prophesied through Zechariah, "*I will strengthen the house of Judah, and I will save the house of Joseph, and I will bring them back; because I have mercy on them. They shall be as though I had not cast them aside; for I am the LORD their God, and I will hear them...I will whistle for them and gather them; for I will redeem them...I will strengthen them in the LORD and they shall walk up and down in His name, says the LORD* (Zechariah 10:6,8,12).

Was prophecy fulfilled in Israel regaining their ancient homeland? Or does fulfillment depend upon their entering into the New Covenant through faith in Christ? One thing is certain; God makes the conditions that govern Jewish possession of the Promised Land, and obedience to His Word was always required. Likewise, obedience to His Word is the condition for our possession of His promises.

B. Peace and Victory - Joshua 21:44

The LORD gave them rest all around, according to all that He had sworn to their fathers. And not a man of all their enemies stood against them; the LORD delivered all their enemies into their hand. Joshua faithfully recorded God's faithfulness to His people. They had the peace and victory He promised. Can you testify personally to God's faithfulness in the same way?

C. God's Trustworthy Word - Joshua 21:45

Not a word failed of any good thing the LORD had spoken to the house of Israel. All came to pass. Jesus said, "*one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled*" (Matthew 5:18), and, *Man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God* (Matthew 4:4).

Applications

1. How committed are you to live by every word of God? How does your life demonstrate your commitment?
2. How much time each day do you set aside to study God's Word? Will you commit to read the Bible through this year to help your understanding?
3. Do you discuss the Bible with other believers in order to confirm your knowledge and avoid tangents?
4. God promised an inheritance in the Promised Land to His people, Israel, and, true to His promise, *all came to pass* just as He had said.

5. In the New Testament, we are told that believers also have the promise of an inheritance from God (Ephesians 1:11; 1 Peter 1:3-6). The apostle Peter describes it as *an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation to revealed in the last time*. Peter calls this our *living hope*. He goes on to say that this promised inheritance is cause for great rejoicing in the face of any grief or trials we may suffer in this life. Have you laid claim to this promise by faith? Are you rejoicing in your inheritance? How can you be strong and courageous like Joshua and the Israelites in possessing your inheritance?