

## **Dr. David Howard, Joshua-Ruth, Session 19, Joshua 20-21 Levitical and Refuge Cities**

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This is Dr. David Howard in his teaching on the books of Joshua through Ruth. This is session 19, Joshua 20-21, Levitical and Refuge Cities.

Greetings again. In this segment, we're going to be looking at the last two chapters of the section in the book of Joshua that we talked about as the distributing the inheritance or the land distribution sections, chapters 13 to 31. Just to review, chapters 13 to 19 gave the distributions for each of the individual tribes. Chapter 13, the tribes that settled east of the Jordan on this map here.

We can see the land of Canaan along here and really to the east of the Jordan, this way would be the two and a half tribes, Joshua 13, and then the rest of the tribes settled west of the Jordan. The most important being Judah down here and Ephraim and Manasseh in the main part of the center part of the country. Chapters 20 and 21 are a little different.

They are devoted to cities. We've mentioned in an earlier segment about the Levites who were receiving no specific territory. Just to review that, in chapter 13, at the end of the chapter, it says in verse 33, that the inheritance of what are called the Transjordan tribes, the ones east of the Jordan, was finished there.

Then the last verse of chapter 13 says, but to the tribe of Levi, Moses gave no inheritance because the Lord God of Israel himself is their inheritance, just as he said to them. Then earlier in that chapter, we see it says to the tribe of Levi alone, verse 14, chapter 13, to the tribe of Levi alone, Moses gave no inheritance because the offerings by fire to the Lord God of Israel are their inheritance, as he said to them. So, the privilege of the personal relationship with God and the privilege of the service to God was considered to be their inheritance.

Then finally in chapter 18, a similar verse, chapter 18, verse 7, the Levites have no portion among you because the priesthood of the Lord is their inheritance. So, we have three different perspectives, the offerings by fire, the priesthood, and God himself are their inheritance. But all of that, of course, is subsumed under this idea of service to God and a close relationship with him.

So, when we get to chapters 20 and 21, these are now the distribution of cities. And in a sense, we can think about 21, which is the chapter that talks about what are called the Levitical cities. That's the larger set.

And chapter 20 is the smaller set. These are called the cities of refuge. There are 48 Levitical cities and they are scattered throughout all of the tribes, pretty close to four per tribe.

There's a couple of tribes where the Levitical cities get five, and there's correspondingly a couple that only get three. But pretty much otherwise, the Levites are scattered four per tribe throughout the nation. Four times 12 is 48.

The Levitical cities on the other, I'm sorry, the cities of refuge on the other hand are a subset. The six cities of refuge are Levitical cities. They do occur in chapter 21, but they are a different type of city that we'll be talking about shortly.

So, let's go to chapter 20 first. And these are called the cities of refuge. There are six of them.

And I guess the place to really begin is back in the book of Exodus chapter 21, because this is where God first talks about this. So, if you take your Bibles to Exodus chapter 21 and look at verses 12 to 14, it says, whoever strikes a man so that he dies shall 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 for you a place to which he may flee.

So, the point here is that if there's intentional premeditated murder, there's a penalty of death. But if it's unintentional, if it's manslaughter, let's say, God will spare them. So, this shows there's a difference.

The law itself recognizes differences in motives and has different ways to deal with them. It says God will appoint a place to which you will flee. And of course, Joshua 20 is the place where we read about what those places are.

Notice also in Exodus 21, verse 14, if a man willfully attacks another to kill him by cunning, you shall take him from my altar that he may die. So that seemed to imply that someone, if they're at the altar, clinging to the altar, there's some protection, some sanctuary for them. Whereas if they take him away from that, then they're out from under God's protection and they can be put to death.

Interestingly, there are a couple of references in 1 Kings to someone clinging to the horns of the altar as a place of escape from those who are attacking them. In 1 Kings 1 and 2, we have two references to that. And there's an ironic reference in the book of Amos to God saying, I'm going to break down the horns of the altars.

In other words, I'm going to take away any place where you can have refuge. Because by the time of Amos, Israel had gotten so corrupted that God was just saying, there's no place you can hide and no place you can run to. I'm going to punish.

But let's go back now to a second passage, which is more detailed, and that's in the book of Numbers chapter 35. And Numbers 35 gives us a much more detailed account of the cities of refuge, looking ahead. And first of all, it begins with the Levitical cities, Numbers 35, 1 to 8. That would correspond to chapter 21 of Joshua.

Then verses 19 to 29, the chapter talks about these cities of refuge. So verses 10 and 11, Numbers 35, God speaking to Moses says, speak to the people of Israel. Say to them, when you cross the Jordan into the land of Canaan, then you shall select six cities to be cities of refuge for you that the manslayer who kills any person without intent may flee there.

It should be a refuge from the avenger. He may not die until he stands in the congregation. And so on it goes.

So that's the preface. That's the backdrop to chapter 20 of Joshua that we are finding here. So let's turn to that chapter now, finally, to Exodus to Joshua chapter 20.

And God gives Joshua the instructions as he had spoken through Moses, verses 1 and 2, appoint cities of refuge of which I spoke to you through Moses that the manslayer who strikes any person without intent or unknowingly may flee there. There shall be for you a refuge from the avenger of blood. And the idea here about the unintentionality of things in verse 3 is important.

It sort of says without intent or even unknowingly may flee there. So again, it shows these gradations and the sensitivity in the law to who these things are. The avenger of blood was someone who could come and take vengeance, apparently.

Now, all vengeance was ultimately to be done by God. But there was this perspective that they could, sometimes there could be someone who takes these vengeance. So, the avenger of blood specifically is mentioned only four times in the Old Testament here, in Numbers chapter 35, Deuteronomy 12, and then in 2 Samuel chapter 14.

It appears like these people in most contexts, it's an illegal or semi-legal context. So, it's not someone taking private vengeance. The term here is *goel ha'adam*.

This is a term that is familiar from other contexts. It's found in the book of Ruth, referring to what was usually translated as the kinsman redeemer.

So, in this case, it's some sort of close relative that had certain obligations to fulfill. But in this case, it's more of a negative thing. We see in the book of Ruth that it's much more positive where they can redeem the family property and so on.

But the idea of the blood vengeance here, the avenger of blood is not free to take private vengeance. The Bible clearly reserves vengeance to God himself. Deuteronomy 32 verse 35 clearly says, vengeance is mine.

I will repay, says the Lord. That's repeated in Isaiah chapter 34. And of course, Paul quotes that in Romans 12.

And Numbers 35 states very clearly that this avenger of blood is only free to kill someone under certain conditions. Namely, if they've killed someone else. And number one, if they have ventured forth from a city of refuge.

In other words, they're not in that protective sanctuary. And if that person is guilty of murder, not manslaughter. So that's very clear from Numbers 35.

And so the avenger of blood apparently had legal status in society to carry out society's, or in other words, God's vengeance, not private vengeance. It's interesting that chapter 20 here, verses four to six, this second part of this section, talks about the conditions in which the offender can find sanctuary in the cities of refuge and how long they can stay there. And there are two things there.

According to verse six, it says, he shall remain in that city until he has stood before the congregation for judgment. So, the first thing is they have to have a chance to defend themselves before a tribunal of some type, defend their innocence. And then secondly, it has to be until the death of him who is the high priest at the time.

Then the manslayer may return to his own town and his own home to the town from which he fled. So that's a significant point about the high priest and the relationship of that person to the person who has caused the crime or the offense. And that person has to stay in the city until the death of the high priest.

Now there's been a lot of things made of that. And from typological perspectives from the New Testament, looking back at the old, Jesus, of course, is our great high priest. And his death is what saves us along with his resurrection.

And so there may be some typological connections there. But certainly, the immediate effect and the immediate message of this is that the manslayer who's killed someone accidentally is not just free to go willy-nilly after arguing his case. But there has to be some sort of death.

And it's not his death now, but the death of the high priest is kind of a symbol. And it's the trigger that allows him to go home, but it's a symbol that it's a reminder that his actions were very serious. A life was taken, even if inadvertently.

And there will be a death that causes the release at that point. There's a question that kind of arises here. It's not specifically addressed in this passage, but it kind of circulates around it.

And that is, the cities of refuge are for people who have committed manslaughter. They've caused an unintentional death. And so the question that arises is, is there forgiveness in the Old Testament for intentional sins, murder or other sins, and sins that are committed consciously and deliberately? Some have argued that in the sacrificial system in the first seven chapters of Leviticus, where you have the peace offerings, the serial offerings, the sin offering, and so on, there really is no specific sacrifice there for deliberate sin.

It appears that they're all for unintentional kinds of sin. And in Numbers chapter 15, there's a striking passage that seems to indicate that there is no forgiveness for deliberate sin. Here's how it reads.

Numbers 15 verse 30. Anyone who sins defiantly, whether native-born or alien, in other words, native-born or ger, that term we've talked about before, a foreigner. Anyone who sins defiantly, whether native-born or ger, blasphemes the Lord.

And that person must be cut off from his people. Verse 31, because he has despised the Lord's word and broken his commands, that person must surely be cut off and his guilt remains on him. And the international version, when it says anyone who sins defiantly, literally in Hebrew, it's with a high hand or with a raised hand.

It's almost like the imagery of sort of shaking your fist in God's face. Anyone who sins in this way, as defiantly confronting, rejecting, challenging God, blaspheming God, there is no forgiveness for that kind of sin. So, because of arguments like this, some Christians have actually further argued that, therefore, it shows the superiority of the New Testament sacrifice of Christ over the Old Testament sacrificial system.

There is no forgiveness for deliberate sin in the Old Testament, whereas Christ's sacrifice covers all sin. Now, by way of response, I first want to affirm that, yes, of course, Christ's sacrifice was infinitely superior to the Old Testament sacrifices in all types, in all cases. The book of Hebrews makes that abundantly clear, especially in chapters 7 through 10.

But there's a more limited question here, and that's whether deliberate sin could be atoned for in the Old Testament. And I think the answer certainly has to be yes. Otherwise, we find examples of plenty of sins that are deliberate, and no Old Testament believer could have then been forgiven.

We have Abraham sinning, Moses sinning, and Joshua, and David with Bathsheba. Certainly, David's adultery with Bathsheba was not incidental, accidental, or unwitting, his murder of Bathsheba's husband, and so on.

So, I think there would be two points that we can support that. First of all, if you go to Leviticus 1, the discussion of the burnt offering, the very words itself kind of indicate this. In Leviticus 1, verse 4, it says that the burnt offering will be accepted on his behalf to make atonement for him.

And this shows that atonement can be made for someone. Leviticus 14, verses 19 and 20 speak of the priest offering a burnt offering on the altar along with the grain offering to make atonement for him, and he'll be clean. So, the burnt offering does show, I think, that there's atonement for deliberate sins in the Old Testament.

And then secondly, I think it's important to even look at a passage in Numbers. So, if you want to turn with me to Numbers chapter 5, that addresses the issue of deliberate sin as well. And it's Numbers 5, verses 6 to 8. And let me find it here for you.

So, God says to Moses, Numbers 5, verse 6, speak to the people of Israel when a man or a woman commits any of the sins that people commit by breaking faith with the Lord. The word breaking faith is a word that we've talked about already in connection with Achan in Joshua chapter 7, verse 1, where it says Israel broke faith with the Lord in the matter of the devoted things. And it turns out it was Achan who stole the things.

We've mentioned that that word occurs also in the context of marital infidelity. So this same point here, when the man or woman commits any of the sins that people commit, there's a whole bunch of sins that would be examples of this breaking of the covenant faith with God. So when a person commits these things and that person realizes his guilt or her guilt, he shall confess his sins that he committed and he shall make full restitution for his wrong, adding a fifth to it and giving it to him whom he did wrong.

But if the man has no next akin, then it goes on to talk about the restoration. So here it's very clear that any of this category of sins are breaking faith and most of them would be deliberate. They're not unwitting.

There is forgiveness. There is covering, sacrificial covering, if the person confesses their guilt. So, I think the distinction here is that there's no forgiveness in the Old Testament for sins committed with a high hand, in other words, deliberately against the Lord in a defiant, unrepentant way.

But if the hand is lowered and the person realizes their guilt and confesses their sin, then clearly there is forgiveness of sin here. So that's an encouraging note, I think, for us to hear and for Israelites to have known that there was forgiveness even for those kinds of sins. So back to the Book of Joshua and the final word about chapter 20.

So, what they did was they set aside six cities, verses seven to eight, and three of them turned out to be in the Transjordan area, east of the Jordan, and three west of the Jordan. And the way they're scattered throughout, none of them is more than a day's walk, a day's journey to get to. So, there would be accessibility throughout the land for everyone who needed to find this kind of sanctuary.

Now, this is a really interesting kind of concept. The verse nine is kind of the summary of the whole thing. These are the cities designated for all the people of Israel and the strangers sojourning among them, the ger, the outsider, the foreigner, that anyone who killed a person without intent might flee there so they may not die by the hand of the avenger of blood till he stood before the congregation.

So that's a beautiful, very interesting, and intriguing kind of thought. It would be wonderful if we had some examples of that later in Scripture, where somebody did that in the narrative stories in the Book of Judges or Samuel or somewhere, Kings. Unfortunately, from our modern perspective, we find no examples of that being played out.

So, either that really never was practiced, or if it was, the writers of Scripture under God's guidance felt that that was not necessary to record for us. But certainly, the principles are here, and it shows that God is a merciful God, holding standards, and the value of human life. There needs to be some restitution for that, but also mercy for the one who kills accidentally.

They are able to find sanctuary and be saved from that. So that's chapter 21, six cities of refuge, which are a subset of the larger set of cities, which are the Levitical cities. So, we'll turn now to chapter 21 and see the cities of the Levites.

And first thing we'll notice is in 21, the first three verses is the final little account where someone comes to ask Joshua and the leaders for their land. We have earlier examples of that of Caleb and Caleb's daughter, Aksah, and the daughters of Zelophehad, the tribes of Joseph. And here's the fifth one here, where it says, chapter 21, verse one, when the heads of the fathers' houses of the Levites came to Eleazar the priest and Joshua son of Nun, and to the heads of the fathers' houses of the tribes of the people of Israel.

So, notice the formal description here. It's Eleazar the priest, Joshua son of Nun. So the two appointed leaders, the priest and Joshua, the other leader.

So, this is all being done neatly and in order. That's the point here. And I think that's a thread that we can see all the way through the land distribution list.

It's not an Oklahoma land grab where people are rushing out to try to grab their piece of the land. It's all been ordered. We see all the evidence in the chapters 13 and 19.

And this is continuing in that same vein. Verse two, they said to them at Shiloh in the land of Canaan, the Lord commanded through Moses that we be given cities to dwell in along with our pasture lands and our livestock. So, by the command of the Lord, the people of Israel gave to the Levites the following cities and pasture lands out of their inheritance.

Then we see the rest of the chapter, sort of the casting of lots and the distributing of the of the cities by those lots. It's kind of an impenetrable list almost. There's a general overview in verses four to eight.

It tells about the different clans, the sons of Aaron, the descendants of Aaron, the lot, verse four, from the clans of the Kohathites. And then the Gershonites, verse six, the Merarites, all these descendants of Aaron, the high priest, the original high priest. And the summary there in verse eight, the cities and their pasture lands that the people of Israel gave by lot to the Levites as God had commanded through Moses.

So, we see this idea of, excuse me, of the land being distributed by the lot. And that's, of course, something that we find later in the Old Testament as well. And it would certainly appear that this is something that God is orchestrating.

The book of Proverbs talks about how the lot is orchestrated by God, and is determined by God. So today, most Christians would discourage gambling by throwing dice or things like that. But in the Bible, that kind of thing is part of the way God worked and made his will known to his people.

There's an interesting kind of footnote to this, side note to this, in the book of Esther. The main word for a lot in Hebrew is the word goral, g-o-r-a-l. In the book of Esther, you may remember that they also cast lots to determine the days in which the Jews would be attacked and so on.

The word there is pur, p-u-r. And many scholars have disbelieved the whole story of Esther or parts of it. One of the reasons is that the word pur is not the word goral.

It's not the word for the lot that's normally found. And they thought they would have argued that the book of Esther is just fictional or that portion of it is fictional. But interesting, somewhere in the 1960s, perhaps early 70s, in the excavation



somewhere in Mesopotamia, there was discovered a little cube about two or three inches on each side made of clay.

And in the Assyrian language, maybe in the Persian language, the word said pur, p-u-r. And that was a really interesting extra-biblical confirmation that at that time, that was a word that was used, even though normally in the Bible, it's a different word for the lot. But anyway, the point here is that the people got, the Levites got all of their cities by careful apportioning.

And again, the Levites, by being scattered throughout the tribes, essentially four Levitical cities per tribe, they were sort of leaven and salt and light in the tribes themselves, or at least they should have been. We know later in Israel's history that they were, many of the times they were corrupted and the high priest was just as corrupt as the king. But that was their task.

That was a spiritual task. And they weren't settled in a little holy enclave. They were spread out.

I think that's a good lesson for us today. I grew up in the mission field in Columbia. The typical stereotype of missionaries from maybe the 19th century is that they would go out and do it wherever, Africa, Latin America, or Asia, and they would establish these missionary compounds.

And they were very nice and very luxurious and so on. And from there, they would venture out into the unholy and godless areas around them. I was fortunate to be, my parents were fortunate to be with the mission, and today most missions are like this, where we just lived among the Columbians.

And we made friends with our neighbors and were able to talk about Christ with that, outside of the formal programs that the missionaries might have had through churches or other things. So, this is a good example of that kind of thing as well. In this final little segment, I want to finish off Joshua chapter 21.

This is the chapter about the Levitical cities. And it's the final chapter of the entire land inheritance, land distribution list sections 13 to 21. But the last three verses of Joshua chapter 21 are kind of a wrap-up to the entire book to this point.

And in some ways, it kind of captures all of the major themes that are found in the book. So, let's look at it and just kind of tease it apart briefly. So, in Joshua 21 verse 43, it said, the Lord gave to Israel all the land.

So, there's the idea of God's gift. It's also to his people, Israel, it's the land. God gave to Israel all the land that he swore to give to their fathers.

So that's the Abrahamic covenant. That's the promise-keeping God. So, all of those things are kind of compressed right here in just a few words in these verses.

So, they took possession of it. That's the idea of the inheritance. They settled there.

Verse 44, the Lord gave them rest. There's this idea of rest that we've talked about in this book. Gave them rest on every side, just as he had sworn to their fathers.

Again, the promise-keeping God, not one of all their enemies had withstood them. So that echoes chapter one, verse five. Nobody will withstand Joshua because God had given all their enemies into their hands.

And then finally, in verse 45, not one word of all the good promises that the Lord had made to the house of Israel had failed. All came to pass. So there again, the promise-keeping God, none of those words failed.

Now it's interesting. I think most English versions say not one of the words, not one word of the promises failed. In Hebrew, the word is fell, F-E-L-L.

And it's as if the point is being said, none of the words are wasted. They landed and they were absorbed. They were received.

None of the words fell to the ground as extra waste. There's an interesting, verse that's similar to this. It's in the book of 1 Samuel.

And it's in the context of God speaking with, or Samuel speaking. And I'd like to turn to that, 1 Samuel chapter three. And in this chapter, we have Samuel being installed now as the next man of God.

And he has the encounter with Eli and God speaks to Samuel during the night. And it turns out he has a message of unfortunately doom for the house of Eli. But then at the end of the chapter in verses 19 to 20, it evaluates Samuel and says that this is the next man of God.

And here's what it reads. 1 Samuel 3, verse 19. And Samuel grew and the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground.

Same exact construction that we have back in Joshua, except Joshua doesn't mention the ground. But the idea of the words falling is in both places. And the idea of words is important.

They're not wasted. And because of that, all Israel from Dan to Bathsheba, from the far north to the far south, knew that Samuel was established as a prophet of the Lord. So that's a wonderful ending to the book of Joshua, is this

summary about he gave the land, he delivered the enemies, not one of his promises fulfilled.

And that's the wrap-up of the inheritance section. And then the final admonitions come in chapters 22 to 24. You

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