

Joshua 20:1-9 | David Baumgartner

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[0:00] We welcome you to the media ministry of Bethel Community Church. Knowing Jesus, making Jesus known. God is good.

And all the time. He is. Amen. It is so good to be here today. And we are studying the book of Joshua.

So we're going to continue that. If you have your Bibles, please turn with me to Joshua chapter 20. If you don't have your Bibles on your handout, it's listed the actual verses we'll be looking at. Verses 1 to 9. In our study of Joshua, the Israelites have already conquered pretty much most of the land that had been promised to them.

And the process has begun now of apportioning the land to the various tribes of Israel. We saw that in chapters 15 through 19 of Joshua.

[1:00] All of this, you realize, is in accordance with the blessings and the wishes of Jacob. Remember Jacob on his deathbed in Genesis 49.

He made his wishes known. And certainly he was led by the Lord when he did that. Just think what it must have been like for the Israelites at this point.

They've been waiting all these years. And now they're finally getting the land that was promised to them. And as we're going to see next week in chapter 21, we're going to see that the Levites will not be getting a portion of the land.

Instead, they will be receiving some 48 cities. That is four from each of the 12 tribes. And I don't want to get into that so much today.

We'll see that next week and why that is. But so you may picture the land of Israel. And you may picture, if you would, 48 cities spread all around the nation of Israel.

[2:04] This morning, we're going to see where God wants to do something else. He wants the Israelites to establish cities of refuge. Oh, what's that going to be about?

That ought to be exciting. If you have your Bible, let's look with me, Joshua chapter 20. And I'm going to be reading the first nine verses. 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.

And 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 a stranger 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.

And 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.

[3:32] 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 and Galilee in the hill country of Naphtali, and Shechem in the hill country of Ephraim, and Kerathabar, that is, Hebron, in the hill country of Judah.

And beyond the Jordan, east of Jericho, they designated Bazir 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 the blood, until he stands before the congregation.

Our Heavenly Father, we are so grateful to be able to come into your very presence today. Thank you for this day that you made, Lord. And we thank you for each person here. Thank you for your word. And we pray, Father, that these words would come alive to us today. Thank you for the grace that we find in it. And, Lord, it's just filled with grace.

[4:55] And we thank you so much for that. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. I thought I would begin this morning with a, if you'd bear with me, a hypothetical situation.

I'm going to be addressing this to the men, but we're a bright group, and so you can apply it as you would. Men, suppose you and your wife bought a home. And it's a two-story home with an attic. And you've been in this neighborhood for about a year. You're pretty happy there, except for one thing. There's this kid in the neighborhood who, for some unknown reason, he really dislikes you. They call him Danny, and he's 13 years old. But I'll tell you, his name ought to be Trouble, because this kid is really Trouble. He's got serious troubles. For instance, a few months ago, you and your wife came home, and you found several of your windows had been broken out of your home.

[6:00] And so, you know, that's a problem here. And then a couple weeks later, your garage is set on fire. Now, no one's been hurt in those situations, but, you know, property damage and so on, it's pretty extensive.

A week later, your car is vandalized. The windows are smashed. Your tires are slashed. The paint job is completely ruined. And now, this whole week, your family pet is missing. Yeah. And you're pretty sure that Danny is behind this. So you go over and you talk to Danny's dad, and you discover that Danny doesn't have one. But he's being raised by his mom and an older brother who's not home at the time. So you have a discussion with Danny's mom, and it does not go well at all. In fact, almost immediately, she's yelling at you. She's calling you names, and she starts accusing you of things, like, for instance, how you hate children and how mean you are.

[7:11] But it doesn't stop there. No. In fact, she tells all the neighbors that are around you, what a jerk you are, and how you hate children, especially her little Danny.

Ever since then, your neighbors are no longer friendly to you. They stop waving to you. They stop saying hi. In fact, they just kind of stare at you and ignore you. I just want to pause right there for a moment. What would you say about that situation? Pretty bad, isn't it? I'd call it a drag. I mean, it's not enough to move over or anything, but yet, you know, maybe Danny will get older, and he'll get past this.

Well, one Saturday afternoon, you decide to work on your house, your attic window, and it needs some exterior work. So you're up there on your ladder. It's about a 30-foot climb up there. And so while you're up there, your hammer slips out of your hand. And so you look down, and, oh, there's Danny.

[8:20] But something's not right. Danny's laying there on the ground. And it becomes apparent to you as you hurry down the ladder that your hammer hit Danny.

And he was killed instantly. Just then, a neighbor comes out and sees Danny laying there on the ground. And immediately, this neighbor goes and gets Danny's mom. And she comes out, along with some neighbors who hear the commotion. And, boy, she is hysterical at this point. She's yelling at you how you killed him. You always wanted to kill him, and now you've killed him. And she has to be restrained by some other neighbors. Well, so the ambulance comes. But you can tell by the way they're acting that there's no hope for Danny.

Danny's dead. And the last thing you remember about that day is Danny's mother yelling something about how, when Danny's older brother gets home, you're going to get it.

[9:22] You're a dead man. He will avenge my Danny's blood. Let me ask you again. Now, how would you describe your situation?

Yeah, let's review some things. I forgot to mention that it's the year 1330 B.C., and you are living in a place. It's a newly established area called Israel. And that's where you are. There's no police force, but there are some laws of the land.

Maybe we can kind of go through some of those here. If you look with me on your handout, they just happen to appear on your handout, so we can look at those laws. First one, notice it says that if a man takes the life of any human being, he shall surely be put to death.

That's out of Leviticus. And I would say, ouch. You keep looking. Well, here's one that goes all the way back to the time of Noah.

[10:26] In Genesis 9, verse 6, Whoever sheds man's blood, by man his blood shall be shed. For in the image of God he made man.

Well, maybe I can pay a sum of money in exchange for this life, like I've heard they do for animals, right? If an animal dies accidentally.

No. I turn to Numbers 35, and it says, You shall not take a ransom for the life of a murderer who is guilty of death, but he shall surely be put to death.

Well, what about this guy's brother who's supposed to be coming after me? Surely that's not right.

No, in Numbers 35, it says, The blood avenger himself shall put the murderer to death.

He shall put him to death when he meets him. So I would say two things about your situation, my friend. One, you were involved in a very unfortunate accident.

[11:34] But the second thing I would tell you is, you're in trouble. You are truly in trouble, and you need some help. Well, friends, help is here because of the God we have.

In God's infinite wisdom, he established a way to preserve justice, and yet it honors life as well.

Let's come back to our text here and look at what is said here in 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.

Let's go ahead and look at some definitions here. What is a city of refuge? Well, that's a safe zone to which a person who accidentally kills another can flee.

And you can be protected from the excessive violence and force from a family member of the deceased until your case is heard. And as we'll see, there's going to be six cities that will be chosen from among those 48.

[12:45] And there's going to be three on each side of the Jordan River. Six cities. And they're spread out geographically. And that's because God wanted it to be easy to get to.

A fugitive could get there to any of those cities pretty much in a half a day. You can find safety. By the way, isn't it fascinating, and we shouldn't miss this, that when Moses wrote this, it was in anticipation that the Israelites would be taking possession of the land?

And we know that didn't happen right away. But here we are. They finally did it. Here's another definition. Look with me. Notice verse 3. The manslayer.

What's that? Friends, that's you in the story. That's anyone who kills a person unintentionally without premeditation. And it says he may flee there.

So a manslayer here, we're told, is someone who kills without any malice. So here we see this distinction between murder and manslaughter.

[13:56] Here's another definition. Notice, the avenger of blood. Did you pick up on that? Verse 3. They shall become your refuge from the avenger of blood.

In our hypothetical situation, this is referring to Danny's older brother, the avenger of blood. He is the nearest blood relative of the person responsible in that family.

And his responsibility is to protect that family's lives, liberty, their property. Do you know he's known by another name? I know you've heard this name before.

The kinsman redeemer. Back in, this Boaz was the kinsman redeemer of Naomi. You'll find this in Ruth chapter 2, verse 20.

But when a life is taken, the kinsman redeemer takes off his hat and puts on another hat called the avenger of blood.

[15:00] And he's responsible for seeking and getting justice. So, if you are that hypothetical manslayer, here's what you must do.

Verse 4. 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.

As we'll see, the manslayer can flee to any one of these six designated cities of refuge. And there, you will receive provisional safety from that avenger of blood.

Here's the procedure. Notice, verse 4. Step 1 is that you stand before the city gate. The gate of the city is where the city's commercial and legal transactions would take place.

And so, you state your case before the elders of the city. You might consider that to be a preliminary hearing. Well, if you're not believed, look with me on your handout from Deuteronomy 19.

[16:07] The elders of his city shall send him and take him from there and deliver him to the hand of the avenger of blood that he may die. Well, that's what you get.

They didn't believe you. But what if your account is believed? And you explain that it was an act, the hammer slipped out as an accident.

Well, then you receive sanctuary in the city of refuge. Step number 2, verse 4. They take you in. They shall take him into the city to them and give him a place so that he may dwell among them. I think it's really important for us to see God's design here. Notice here how the Levites were especially equipped to take this kind of responsibility.

Notice you'll receive three things. You'll receive provision. You think about it, some food and a place to stay. Secondly, you'll be cared for. Think about this.

[17:14] Have any of you been involved in a situation similar to this? Maybe you haven't taken a life of someone accidentally. But we get in difficult spots. Unfortunate, unplanned things happen to us.

And sometimes it's those times where we may question, why, who are my friends? What should I do? Where shall I go? God knows. We are but dust.

But what a blessing. If you're ever in a situation like that, to be surrounded by people who are able to instruct you, pray for you, help you, encourage you.

And that's what I would suggest the Levites were there to do. They were the teachers of the law.

And that means that you're in a city full of lawyers. Now, I'm not going to have any lawyer jokes.

But the thing is that when you are in trouble, where do you go? Yeah, you usually go to a lawyer.

They're also not only lawyers, they're mediators between Israel and Israel's God.

[18:21] And so they would be skilled in matters involving mediation between the offender and the victims, the family of the victims. But also they've been assigned as caregivers and overseers of the tabernacle, which means that they could point people to the Lord for worship.

And I would say that worship is a very important thing. Amen. That's why we're here today. You know, some people would probably have a cow if they saw all of these, all of us wonderful people in this room.

You know, because, hey, you know, you need to stay six feet apart, and you need to do this and need to do that. No, worship is important. And so especially in difficult times like this.

And thirdly, you would receive protection. Look with me what he says here in verse 5. It's really important to know the blood avenger is not just free to kill somebody.

No, he actually has an obligation to kill someone. It's his duty to the next of kin. That's his duty.

[19:47] Or else he has to forfeit his own life. So I would say this avenger is motivated. So here's the third step. You've been invited into the town here.

The third step is a formal trial. Look with me. Verse 6. This tells us here that this whole process is not some way to allow people to escape justice.

No. It actually preserves justice. There will be a trial. And you'll be happy to know, if you are the manslayer, that the threshold for a guilty verdict for premeditated murder is very high.

Requires more than one witness. Look with me in your handout, Deuteronomy 17, verse 6. On the evidence of two witnesses, or three witnesses, He who is to die shall be put to death.

He shall not be put to death on evidence of one witness. So if you are found guilty in the trial of premeditated murder, you are handed over to the avenger for execution.

[21:10] But if you are found not guilty, then what happens? Are you set free? Are you able to return home? No.

No. You're not. You must live the rest of your life in the city of refuge. Wow. You mean I can't return home?

No. The city of refuge becomes your new home. And you cannot leave that city. Now, you know, at this point, we may say, well, why is that?

Well, because the fact is, you are a manslayer. You're guilty of taking a life. When your hammer slipped out of your hand and struck little Danny in the head, his blood spilled.

And think about Danny's family. Danny's family will no longer have him around. There will be no prom dance. There will be no graduation celebration.

[22 : 15] No children. No grandchildren. No money from him getting a job one day. And the thing is, is his blood spilled on the ground.

And look at what the Lord says in Numbers chapter 35. You shall not pollute the land in which you are. For blood pollutes the land.

And no expiation. That word means turning away wrath. 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. And you shall not defile the land in which you live, in the midst of which I dwell. This is what the Lord is saying.

For I, the Lord, am dwelling in your midst of the sons of Israel. The main point here is that blood pollutes the land. And the land has to be clean because the Lord himself dwells there.

[23 : 14] He resides among his people. The only way that you, the manslayer, can return home free and clear.

Look with me, verse 6. Until the death of the one who is the high priest in those days. Then the manslayer shall return to his own city, to his own house, to the city from which he fled.

What this tells us here is that the death of the high priest, for whatever reason, has atoning value. It's like an animal sacrifice.

His death is credited to your account. It satisfies the law. Now, when we talk about high priest, we all know that high priests offer sacrifices on behalf of the people.

But here, this is the only place that I know where the life of the high priest himself is treated as a sacrifice. And it can restore you to your home, to your friends.

[24 : 28] All the consequences of that deed, that terrible day, are all done away with. The key thing to know is that justice is served. And his death, the death of the high priest, for whatever reason, it is accepted.

And now you can go home free from guilt, free from retaliation, from any avengers of blood. What a text.

What a set of laws that we can live under. So how do we apply this? Yeah, how do you apply it? What does all this tell us?

Well, for one thing, certainly we can all get in trouble, right? We can. We can be accused of things. Friends, we live in a fallen world. We live in a sinful world.

And we ourselves are sinners. You may find yourself in a situation like this. Here's five things that I see in here. First, it tells us about God and his character.

[25 : 35] Did you know that Israel was the only nation that did this? Out of all of the other nations and civilizations, only Israel had this.

And I think that says a lot about God. Because, you know, these are God's people. And he wanted his people to be a showcase to the world.

Look with me what he says here in Deuteronomy chapter 4, starting in verse 5. See, I have taught you statutes and judgments, just as the Lord my God commanded me.

This is Moses speaking. That you should do thus in the land where you are entering, to possess it. Verse 6. So keep and do them. For that is your wisdom and your understanding.

In the sight of the peoples. who will hear all these statutes and say, surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people? For what great nation is there that has a God so near to it as the Lord our God, whenever we call on him?

[26 : 42] Or what great nation is there that has statutes and judgments as righteous as this whole law which I'm setting before you? Maybe I can become one of these Israelites.

That's the point. So it tells us about God's character. Secondly, it tells us that God places a very high value on human life.

The loss of life is taken very seriously here. And that's because, it's what we're told, we're created in God's image. Thirdly, it tells us that God loves justice.

He is just in his dealings with people. And yet, we also see mercy. He takes these mitigating circumstances into account.

There is a difference between an accidental death or a manslaughter versus a premeditated act that we call murder. And this whole process guarantees a fair hearing.

[27 : 43] Fourthly, notice how God loves community. He loves people. And God establishes this procedure that actually involves all the people in the community.

And it promotes order and civility instead of vigilantism. It keeps family feuds from beginning rather than one family against another.

Think about it if you have this avenger of blood going back and forth. Sounds like the Hatfields and McCoys. But it prevents that. And fifth, God is the great designer.

He establishes the Levites as priests who can also serve as defenders and protectors of the oppressed and the innocent. He knows what we need because he's a good God.

It's really interesting. If you look in verses 7 and 8, it lists the cities of refuge. Even the very list and the names of the cities suggest what I just said.

[28:51] Kadesh, what does that mean? It means righteousness. Shicham, it means portion. I think of Psalm 142, verse 5.

I cried out to thee, O Lord, and I said, thou art my refuge, my portion in the land of the living.

Hebron, that word means fellowship.

Through him, we can enjoy fellowship with him and with one another. And then on the east side of the Jordan River, you have Golan. That means to wander or to travel.

Ramoth, that means high or exalted. We dwell in the heights. Even though we're exiles and pilgrims and strangers in this land, we can dwell in the heights with the Lord.

And Bezer, that means stronghold. Psalm 94, 22. The Lord has become my stronghold. And my God is my rock.

[29:49] The rock of my refuge. Can you imagine being on the run like this and finding a city of refuge and looking in the Psalms and seeing these?

Well, of course, they're not there yet. But, you know, seeing these truths about God, about who he is. So, how about us today? I can't escape this.

There is an issue in many American cities today. There's about 40 of them here in North America that have formed a movement called cities of refuge or sanctuary cities.

Have you heard that before? Yeah. Yeah. It's a form of civil disobedience. And they offer very little or no cooperation to the federal government to carry out deportations of people that are here illegally.

Numerous churches are part of this movement. And they believe that to offer a shield of protection to illegal immigrants is a noble and good thing.

[30:58] And they actually see it rooted in this Old Testament law we just studied. Personally, I think that the commands in the Old Testament here that we just read, they were never intended to provide a place where people can avoid the law.

No, rather, it allows the law to take its proper course. But let me also say this. There are other ways and other reasons to show kindness to strangers and to foreigners.

As it says in Deuteronomy chapter 10, he executes justice for the orphan and the widow and shows his love for the alien by giving him food and clothing.

And listen to this. So show your love for the alien. For you were aliens in the land of Egypt. So this is a matter that I'm still learning about.

And I'd like to ask you, there's a great movie that we just saw. It's called Jesus in Athens. It's on Prime Video through Amazon.

[32:03] If you can watch it, Jesus in Athens. And I've got to tell you, friends, it has softened my heart. Because I think for many years I've been too politically motivated in my thoughts.

And I have to remember first, I'm a Christian. I'd invite you, watch that movie, and then we can talk about it. But I'll tell you what. Whether or not we agree or disagree about the cities of refuge, there's one thing for sure.

And that's that we can look at the cross. We can look at the cross of Jesus. And remember, you and I live in a fallen world. And this passage reminds us that as lost sinners, we're in danger of judgment.

And remember for us, in Romans chapter 6, the wages of sin is death. So if you're involved in a situation, and if you pull out the book of the law, and you look at it, I'm telling you what, friends, you're going to be hit in the face with the weaknesses of the law.

All the law can do is condemn us. Amen. That's all it can do. And so you remember what it says in Hebrews 10. This is a God incident here.

[33:31] Hebrews 10. For the law, since it was only a shadow of the good things to come, and not the very form of things can never, by the same sacrifices year by year, which they offer continually,

make perfect those who draw near.

No. No. I picked on brandier because we studied the law in our men's Sunday school. But, friends, the law disappoints. The law only identifies and measures your sin.

But Jesus offers protection eternally for all those who take refuge. My last verse here is Psalm 34, 22. The Lord redeems the soul of his servants, and none of those who take refuge in him will be condemned.

If I could invite the musicians to come up. Think back to Jesus. Do you realize that Jesus was falsely accused? Yeah, he was.

He was falsely accused by those who wanted his blood. And there was no advocate for him. But he went on to the cross to make intercession for us.

[34:47] And his blood completely satisfies the law. Much better than any high priest could. In contrast to the high priest's death, Jesus' death provides real redemption, real deliverance from bondage.

As Paul said in Romans 8, there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Let's all stand together and worship the Lord. Let me go ahead and pray.

Father, we thank you so much. Just for this passage, Lord, that reminds us of your character. And how you have provided a way for us to stand before you, Lord.

And that we could not be guilty of our sins. But that rather through Jesus Christ, we can be reconciled to you.

And Lord, it was through your blood, the blood of Jesus himself, that it enables us to even come before you, Lord. Thank you so much. In his name we pray.

[35:53] Amen.