



A MODEL OF OBEDIENCE • TAKE REFUGE IN GOD • JOSHUA 20:1-9 •
04/15/2018

MAIN POINT

The cities of refuge in the promised land remind us of God's justice, provision, and faithfulness.

INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

What is a place of refuge in your life, a place where you escape to seek peace, quiet, and rejuvenation? What is it about that place that draws you there?

What are some of the reasons we feel the need to seek out refuge from time to time?

The idea of seeking refuge has to do with a person's need for aid, relief, or escape. Maybe you have sought refuge from the stresses of your job or life in general by taking a long vacation. Or perhaps you have sought refuge by turning to a trusted friend in a time of need. Scripture mentions the concept of refuge often. In the passage we will look at today, we see God set aside specific places of refuge where people could escape for physical protection from people seeking revenge. This action from God shows us that He is faithful to keep His word, looks out for His children, and champions justice.

UNDERSTANDING

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ JOSHUA 20:1-9.

What do you know about the story of Joshua up to this point?

Look back at Joshua 13–19. What takes place in these chapters?

Joshua 1–12 describes how the people of Israel entered into the promised land after their desert-wandering and took control of the land through military force, with Joshua at the helm. While in principle the conquest was successful in Joshua's lifetime, there was much work left to be done in the tribes' taking control of their allotted lands from the Canaanites. Chapters 13–19 give a detailed account of this process, when the promised land was divided up among the 12 tribes of Israel. In chapter 20, we read that God reminded Joshua to have the tribes designate cities of refuge to help in the administration of justice.

What was the purpose of the cities of refuge? Who did they protect?

Look at Numbers 35:6,11-28. By telling Joshua to create cities of refuge, God reinforced the command He had originally given to Joshua years earlier. What does this tell us about God?

The cities of refuge designated by God had a specific purpose. They were a place of escape and protection for a person who unintentionally murdered another person and was being sought out for revenge by the victim's family. In Exodus 21:12-14 and Numbers 35, we read that God promised to set aside a place where these people could flee, and in Joshua 20 we read the fulfillment of that promise. The cities of refuge were more than just a place of escape: they were a reminder of God's faithfulness to His people.

We know that God is a God of justice. What was just about the cities of refuge?

How do you see God's justice at work in your life?

A victim's family seeking out an accidental murderer with the intent to kill (known as blood vengeance) was a form of injustice in the Israelite community. By giving the people cities of refuge, God guaranteed a place of protection until justice, in the form of a fair trial (v. 6), could be administered. Justice is a part of God's very nature, and it is at work in even the smallest details of our world, as evidenced here.

What does Joshua's obedience (vv. 7-9), reveal about him, his leadership, and his relationship with God?

Joshua 13:1 tells us that when these events were taking place, Joshua had reached old age. By this point in his life, he had seen God's faithfulness time and again, and the result was Joshua's faithful obedience. Verses 7-9 tell us that the people of Israel did set aside cities of refuge where they could experience God's justice and protection first hand.

This idea of taking refuge in God is not limited to the specific cities of refuge mentioned in Joshua 20; it is a theme that runs throughout all of Scripture, and we see it come up time and again in Psalms.

ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ PSALM 34.

What does David teach us about God in Psalm 34? Talk through the various attributes that David calls attention to in this psalm.

What does David teach us about the people who take refuge in God?

Which of these descriptions of your identity—child, righteous, redeemed, servant—do you need to be reminded of today?

In Psalm 34, David revealed that God is good, and He invites us to take refuge in Him (v. 8). Throughout this psalm, David highlights many attributes of God, including His goodness, protection, provision, salvation, and redemption. David also mentioned several attributes of God's people who take refuge in Him. He calls them righteous, saints, children, and servants. God continues to extend His invitation of refuge to us today, as He did for the Israelites and for David. This invitation is a reflection of the goodness and love God has toward you and the life He wants you to find in Him.

APPLICATION

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

What does it look like for us to seek refuge in God?

How would you benefit from the refuge God is offering you today? What steps can you take to find refuge in Him?

In what ways can our group be a place of refuge for the people in it? What will we gain from being this for one another?

PRAY

Close in prayer, thanking God for His justice, provision, and faithfulness in our lives. Pray that your group members would find refuge in Him today for whatever reason they may need it. Also pray that your group would be a place of refuge where people feel safe, loved, and held accountable.

COMMENTARY

13:1–21:45. Although some of the initial descriptions of the allotments consider regions, most of the divisions of the tribal territories in these chapters appear in two forms of literature: boundary descriptions and town lists. The boundary descriptions normally identify themselves by using the term “border” and verbs such as “turn,” “ascend,” “descend,” “curve” and other terms linking one town or natural feature with another along the line of the border. In defining the lands, God further extended His relationship into the particulars of the blessing of the land that He had given the Israelites.

Town lists also appear in many tribal allotments as towns that belong to a tribe. Sometimes they are subdivided into regions of the tribe. This is true of the lengthiest town list in the allotment—that of Judah in 15:20–63. Such lists are common in administrative texts in the same period. These similarities suggest that this document had the importance and legal force of a treaty. As new towns were founded, they were added to the document throughout Israel’s history. This procedure would retain the same boundaries but update the population centers in those tribal areas for as long as Israel possessed them. This was the literary embodiment of the physical witness that made up God’s ongoing covenantal gift of the promised land to His people.

20:2. In this chapter some of the land or towns given to Israel are set aside for a specific purpose. On the significance of the cities of refuge, see Exodus 21:12–14; Numbers 35:9–15, 22–28; Deuteronomy 4:41–43; and 19:1–10. These passages indicate that there were to be six towns—three east and three west of the Jordan River.

20:3. Someone who killed another person unintentionally or accidentally could find refuge in one of these towns from a form of blood vengeance in which the dead person’s nearest kin was to seek the death of the killer in order to remove any blood guilt from their family.

20:4. The elders of that city functioned as the judges who heard all important disputes within the community.

20:6. The trial before the assembly was presumably a legal trial in his hometown where the killing occurred (Num 35:22-28). Even if he was acquitted of premeditated murder, he remained in the city of refuge until the death of the high priest serving at that time. Presumably the avenger was to accept the high priest's death as a substitute for the guilt incurred by the shedding of innocent blood. The killer was free to return home.

20:7. Three cities of refuge were originally envisioned west of the Jordan River (Num 35:9-15). Perhaps the size of the population led Joshua and the leadership to appoint six cities and name them here. They were located across the land so that a person was never far from such a place of refuge.

20:8. These cities of refuge located east of the Jordan River had been designated and named by Moses (Dt 4:41-43).

READING ASSIGNMENT FOR NEXT WEEK

Joshua 23:1-16