



Study Guide: Joshua – Chapter 20

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This study guide provides an educational overview of Joshua Chapter 20 using a verse-by-verse structure, theological context, and application-oriented insights grounded in Scripture.

Introduction

Joshua Chapter 20 introduces the concept of cities of refuge, a critical provision for justice and mercy within the Israelite community. This chapter contributes to the overall narrative by showing how God's law, given through Moses, is being implemented in the land under Joshua's leadership. It highlights the balance between protecting innocent life and ensuring justice for unintentional manslaughter. Readers should watch for how these cities serve as a sanctuary and a practical expression of God's covenantal justice.

Context

Joshua 20 is situated within the broader context of the Israelites' conquest and settlement of Canaan. Following the military campaigns, Joshua is tasked with organizing the land and establishing the social and legal structures necessary for the community's stability. The chapter reflects the continuation of Mosaic law, specifically the instructions given in Numbers 35 and Deuteronomy 19 regarding cities of refuge. The key speaker is Joshua, acting under God's command, and the setting is the newly settled land of Canaan where the Israelites are establishing their society according to divine law.

Outline

The chapter begins with God's command to Joshua to designate specific cities as places of refuge for those who commit unintentional manslaughter. It then describes the establishment of six cities distributed across the tribal territories to ensure accessibility. Finally, the chapter outlines the legal protections afforded to the manslayer within these cities and the conditions under which they may safely reside or be returned to face justice if guilty of intentional murder.

Verse-by-Verse Study



Verses 1–3: God commands Joshua to set apart cities of refuge as instructed by Moses, emphasizing the continuity of divine law from Sinai to the new generation. The purpose is to provide sanctuary for anyone who kills another unintentionally, preventing the avenger of blood from exacting revenge prematurely.

Verses 4–5: Joshua designates six cities of refuge—three on the east side of the Jordan and three on the west—ensuring equitable access for all tribes. This distribution reflects the importance of justice being accessible throughout the land.

Verses 6–7: These cities are to be well-known and open to all Israelites, serving as a clear refuge for those in need. The passage underscores the public nature of this provision and its role in maintaining social order.

Verses 8–9: The chapter concludes by explaining the legal protections granted to the manslayer who flees to a city of refuge. They are safe from the avenger of blood until standing trial before the congregation. If found innocent, they may live safely in the city until the death of the high priest, after which they may return home without fear of retribution.

Verses 10–11: The text contrasts the protection given to accidental killers with the fate of those who commit murder intentionally, who are not granted refuge but are subject to capital punishment. This distinction upholds the principle of just retribution.

Key Themes

One key theme is the balance between justice and mercy. The cities of refuge provide protection for those who cause death unintentionally, demonstrating God’s concern for fairness and compassion. Another theme is the sanctity of life, as the law carefully differentiates between accidental and intentional killing. Additionally, the chapter highlights the role of community and legal processes in maintaining order and preventing blood feuds. Finally, the provision of refuge points to God’s sovereignty over life and death and the importance of divine law in governing human relationships.

Cross-References

Numbers 35:9–34 provides the original instructions for cities of refuge, clarifying their purpose and legal procedures. Deuteronomy 19:1–13 reiterates these laws, emphasizing the need for fair trials and the protection of innocent life. Psalm 82:3–4 calls for defending the weak and fatherless, which aligns with the protective role of the cities of refuge. In the



New Testament, Hebrews 6:18 speaks of God's unchanging promise and justice, echoing the covenantal faithfulness seen in Joshua's obedience. These references deepen understanding by situating Joshua 20 within the broader biblical framework of justice and mercy.

Application

Modern disciples can learn from Joshua 20 the importance of balancing justice with mercy in community life. The cities of refuge model a system that protects the vulnerable while upholding accountability, encouraging believers to advocate for fair treatment and due process in society. This chapter challenges Christians to reflect on how they respond to wrongdoing, emphasizing patience and investigation rather than quick judgment. It also invites believers to trust in God's justice and sovereignty, recognizing that ultimate refuge and protection come from Him. Additionally, the principle of sanctuary can inspire the church to be a place of safety and restoration for those in need.

Summary

Joshua Chapter 20 establishes the cities of refuge as a divine provision for protecting those who cause death unintentionally, balancing justice with mercy in the newly settled land. Through Joshua's obedience, the chapter demonstrates the ongoing application of Mosaic law and God's concern for fair treatment within the community. The cities serve as a tangible expression of God's justice system, safeguarding innocent life while ensuring accountability. This chapter contributes a vital legal and theological dimension to the book of Joshua, emphasizing the covenantal commitment to uphold life and justice in the Promised Land.