

p 69 WEEK 9: CITIES FOR JUSTICE, PEOPLE FOR WORSHIP

Joshua 20:1–21:45

The Place of the Passage

Joshua 20–21 gives us a closer look at life in the land for Israel in two areas—criminal justice and worship—based on what Moses had said they should do when they entered the land. At first glance, as with other parts of Joshua, it may appear there isn't much here for the New Testament Christian. But with some reflection, there is much to learn. This section closes with a God-exalting summary of all that has happened to this point in the narrative.

The Big Picture

Joshua carries out Moses' instructions for Israel's life under the Lord in the areas of criminal justice and worship.

Reflection and Discussion

Read through Joshua 20:1–21:45, then reflect on this section of Scripture using the questions below. (For further background, see the *ESV Study Bible*, pages 424–426; available online at www.esvbible.org.)

p 70 1. Cities of Refuge (20:1–9)

This chapter opens with a command from the Lord to appoint cities of refuge according to Moses' instruction. Read the background to this in Numbers 35:9–34. What factors distinguish murder from manslaughter?

As you read the Joshua and Numbers passages, who are the parties involved in determining a killer's fate?

What does this arrangement teach us about God? What does this passage teach us about mankind?

Israel's theocracy was unique to this stage in God's salvation plan. Given that these laws assumed certain realities about God, human dignity, and human sin, do we find any principles we can apply to the administration of justice elsewhere?

p 71 What might be the significance of the manslayer's waiting to leave his place of refuge until the death of the high priest? Numbers 35:26–28 provides a clue.

2. Cities for Levites (21:1–45)

Why don't the Levites get an inheritance like the rest of Israel's tribes?

Joshua 21:41 tells us the Levites were spread throughout the nation. Given their function in Israel's life, what was God's purpose in this placement of the Levites?

With the land now divided, the last three verses of this chapter summarize all that the Lord has done for his people. What three things has the Lord given to Israel? What key verb is repeated?

God's sovereignty in Israel's salvation is plain. What response should this evoke from us as we reflect on our own salvation?

p 72 Read through the following *Gospel Glimpses*, *Whole-Bible Connections*, and *Theological Soundings*. Then take time to consider the *Personal Implications* these reflections have for your walk with the Lord.

Gospel Glimpses

WORTH OF HUMAN LIFE. A certain view of human beings undergirds all of Joshua 20. According to Genesis 1:27, "God created man in his own image." Human beings are like God in important ways, representing him in the world. An affront to any human being is an affront to God. This is why death is given as a penalty for murder (Gen. 9:6; see also James 3:9). The inestimable worth of humanity could not be clearer than on the cross of Christ. There Jesus, having become fully human, died a human death for the redemption of human beings (Heb. 2:14).

THE LORD GIVES WHAT HE PROMISES. As we have learned, the Bible is a story of promise and fulfillment held together by a series of unfolding covenants. The book of Joshua is one installment in this story. While the story of the Old Testament recounts dark days for Israel, the story of Joshua is largely encouraging. The people have generally obeyed, and the Lord has given them land through many powerful victories—just as he promised. This is why this section ends by referring to the "good promises that the LORD had made ... [which] came to pass" (Josh. 21:45). Likewise today we glorify God for all he has brought to pass in Christ. As Paul says, "All the promises of God find their Yes in him" (2 Cor. 1:20).

Whole-Bible Connections

A STORY OF SUBSTITUTION. If the manslayer leaves the city of refuge and is killed by the avenger, the avenger is not guilty (Num. 35:26–28). However, if he leaves after the high priest’s death, the avenger may not kill him. We may presume that the high priest’s death serves as a substitute for the manslayer’s death. This is consistent with the pattern of substitution in Scripture. While the emphasis of Joshua is on the land, sacrifice and substitution are also vital to the story. The celebration of the Passover and the presence of the Levites reinforce sin’s penalty and God’s provision. Later the prophet Isaiah would speak of the One to come who would be “crushed for our iniquities” (Isa. 53:5). All of this looks forward to Jesus Christ, our Great High Priest, who accomplished a substitutionary atonement when he “put away sin” once and for all “by the sacrifice of himself” (Heb. 9:26).

p 73 LEVITES AMONG GOD’S PEOPLE. When we see the priests spread around the land, this should call to mind their specific function in the life of Israel: to instruct the people in the Word and to represent the people to God through the tabernacle and the sacrificial system. Every sacrifice offered for sin was a reminder of sin, its penalty, and the inadequacy of animal sacrifices to make atonement (Heb. 10:3–4).

Theological Soundings

GOD, HUMANS, AND HUMAN GOVERNMENT. The Sinaitic covenant is not a pattern for government in general. Still, suppositions in Israel’s life about God, the world, and human nature have a bearing on our own practices in government. The protections and consequences for taking life assume human dignity. Murder and vengeance assume human sinfulness. The requirement of two witnesses, with agreement from the congregation, assumes finite human knowledge and perception, and also the imperfect nature of human justice. Universal access to safety, checks on human power, the presumption of innocence, considerations for intent and motive, and punishments that fit crimes (Ex. 21:23–25) are all elements worthy of consideration for government wherever it is found.

COHERENCE OF GOD’S INERRANT WORD. Joshua 21:45 is a sweeping description of how well things have gone for Israel: “Not one word of all the good promises that the LORD had made to the house of Israel had failed.” But since Canaanite land and inhabitants remain unconquered, is this statement true (see 23:1–5)? Some say Joshua is really a patchwork of material stitched together without a divine author behind it, but an understanding of literary genre can help us grasp the coherence of God’s Word: Joshua is a work of prophetic history. That is, this is history with a theological purpose. If we assume one author, we may assume this writer meant us to interpret any given part of the book in light of the whole: of course there is unfinished business, but the point of emphasis is the Lord’s faithfulness to his promises.

Personal Implications

Take time to reflect on the implications of Joshua 20:1–21:45 for your life. How does this passage lead you to praise God, repent of sin, and trust in his gracious promises? Write down your reflections under the three headings we have considered and on the passage as a whole.

p 74 **1. Gospel Glimpses**

2. Whole-Bible Connections

3. Theological Soundings

4. Joshua 20:1–21:45

As You Finish This Unit ...

Praise God for his creation of humankind in his image and for his justice and protection through human government. Thank him for all of the good promises he has given and fulfilled for us in Christ.