
Joshua 20

Joshua 20:1–9

The Cities of Asylum

Introduction: In Joshua 20, God will have Joshua set aside six cities for those who are guilty of unintentional manslaughter. It is here where we see that there is a difference between killing and murder, even under the law. The introduction of the NIV Study Bible is perfect here: *Having distributed the land to the tribes, the Lord's next administrative regulation...provided an elementary system of government, specifically a system of regional courts to deal with capital offenses having to do with manslaughter. Thus this most inflammatory of cases was removed from local jurisdiction, and a safeguard was created against the easy miscarriage of justice (with its potential for endless blood feuds) when retribution for manslaughter was left in the hands of family members. The cities chosen were among those also assigned to the Levites, where ideally the Law of Moses would especially be known and honored.*¹ You certainly recognize some of the safeguards in our present-day justice system taken directly out of the Bible. Since we have covered this ground before in Num. 35, we will move fairly quickly through this chapter.

Also, three of these cities have already been set aside by Moses; those three on the east side of the Jordan. They are mentioned again here as Joshua has this thing for completeness.

Outline of Chapter 20:

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What God Said about the Cities of Asylum

Num. 35:6, 9–28 Deut. 19:1–10

Literally:

Smoother English rendering:

And so spoke Y^ehowah unto Joshua, to say, Joshua 20:1 **The Jehovah spoke to Joshua, saying,**

It has been awhile since we have heard the voice of God in this book. We will hear it less and less as we continue into the book of Judges. Here, I don't know if this is spoken again to Joshua or if we are looking back to Num. 35. Although that passage specifically reads: **Now Jehovah spoke to Moses in the plains of Moab by the Jordan opposite Jericho, saying...** (Num. 35:1), that does not preclude God from speaking both to Moses and to Joshua.

“Speak unto sons of Israel, to say, ‘Give to yourselves cities of the asylum which I spoke to you by a mouth of Moses.

Joshua
20:2

“Speak to the sons of Israel and say, ‘Designate specific cities of asylum, just as I had spoken to you through Moses.

The verb used here is the 2nd person masculine plural, Qal imperative of *nāthan* (נָתַן) [pronounced *naw-THAHN*], which means *give, grant, place, put, set*. In this passage, we see it translated as *give* (Young); *set out* (Rotherham); *appoint* (Owen, NKJV); *designate* (NASB, NKJV alternate). Recall, that this is the word which is translated 84 different ways in the KJV. Strong's #5414 BDB #678.

¹ *The NIV Study Bible*; ©1995 by The Zondervan Corporation; p. 315.

The kind of city we are looking at should be examined here. The Hebrew word is masculine noun *miq^olâṭ* (מִקְלוֹט) [pronounced *mik-LAWT*], which means *refuge, asylum*. To differentiate this from the other several words also rendered *refuge*, we will render this *asylum*. This word is used exclusively in Num. 35, Joshua 20 and 21 and I Chron. 6 to refer to these cities. We do not find this particular word used in conjunction with anything else. Strong's #4733 BDB #886. I will be putting together an analogy later in this chapter, which analogy would have been much easier to establish had I conveniently neglected to tell you that the word found in this chapter should really be rendered *asylum*.

One would hope that this verse would clarify whether this is a new revelation or whether Joshua is taking his responsibilities one at a time, taking care of what is necessary. It sounds as though God is prompting Joshua here to move onto the next matter of business, which is the designating of the cities of asylum. Back to when God first spoke to Moses, the passage read like this: **Now Jehovah spoke to Moses in the plains of Moab by the Jordan-Jericho, saying, "Command the sons of Israel that they give to the Levites from the inheritance of their possess, cities to live in; and you will also give to the Levites pasture lands around the cities...and the cities which you will give to the Levites, six cities of asylum, which you will give to the manslayer to flee to; and, in addition to them, you will give forty-two cities."** Then Jehovah spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak to the sons of Israel and say to them, 'When you cross the Jordan into the land of Canaan, then you will designate for yourselves cities to be your cities of asylum, that the manslayer who has killed any person unintentionally may flee there. And the cities will be to you as a asylum from the redeemer, so that the manslayer may not die until he stands before the congregation for trial. And the cities which you are to give will be your six cities of asylum. You will give three cities across the Jordan and three cities in the land of Canaan; they are to be cities of asylum. These six cities will be fore asylum for the sons of Israel, and for the alien and for the sojourner among them; that anyone who strikes down a person unintentionally may flee there. But if he strikes him down with an iron object, so that he died, he is a murderer; the murderer will be certainly put to death. And if he strikes him down with a stone in the hand, by which he dies, he is a murderer, and the murderer will certainly be put to death. Or if he struck him with a wooden object in the hand, but which he dies, he is a murderer and the murderer will certainly be put to death. The redeemer of blood himself will put the murderer to death; he will put him to death when he meets him. And if he pushed him out of hatred, or threw something at him lying in wait and he died; or if he struck him down with his hand in enmity, and he died, the one who struck him down will be put to death—he is a murderer. The redeemer of blood will put the murderer to death when he meets him. But if he pushed him suddenly without enmity, or threw something at him without lying in wait, or with any deadly object of stone, and without seeing it dropped on him so that he died, while he was not his enemy nor seeking his injury, then the congregation will judge between the slayer and the redeemer of blood according to these ordinances. Then the congregation will deliver the manslayer from the hand of the redeemer of blood, and the congregation will restore him to his city of asylum to which he fled, and he will live in it until the death of the great priest who was anointed with the holy oil. But if the manslayer at any time go beyond the border of his city of asylum to which he may flee, and the redeemer of blood finds him outside the border of his city of asylum, and the redeemer of blood kills the manslayer, he will not be guilty of blood because he should have remained in his city of asylum until the death of the high priest. But after the death of the great priest the manslayer will return to the land of his possession.' " (Num. 35:1–2, 6, 9–28). What we already have recorded in the book of the law is a clear delineation of how involuntary manslaughter is to be dealt with. This passage in Joshua will not go into the same amount of detail. In Deut. 19:1–10, Moses speaks directly to the land west of the Jordan and speaks of three cities to be set aside for this purpose and gives an example of involuntary manslaughter. In v. 1, Moses speaks of God cutting off the nations and giving the Israelites the land of these nations; since God had already given to Israel the land on the east side of the Jordan, this speaks of the future and what God will do. Therefore, the cities of asylum in this passage pertain to the land west of the Jordan. In v. 9, Moses mentions adding three more cities to these three. I belabor this point so that no one superficially reads Deut. 19 and Num. 35 and decides that there is some kind of a contradiction here. Now, back to the original point, it appears as though God is speaking to Joshua personally here, separate from the incident in Num. 35, although I wouldn't stake my life on it.

A summary of what happens when a person commits involuntary manslaughter:

1. He must flee to a city of refuge or asylum.

2. At the entrance of this city, he speaks to the elders of the city, to present his preliminary case. This is much like entering a plea in court with a trial date to be set. He is admitting to manslaughter but maintains that it was involuntary.
3. He is taken into the city under custody of the Levites (although this is not really covered in any sort of detail). This is probably equivalent to being released on one's own recognizance, but he cannot leave town.
4. A trial is held and he presents his case. The purpose of court being held here, as the NIV Study Bible points out, is to keep emotions from overruling the facts. A killing of a very popular person or a very young person might draw the outrage of the townspeople who desire revenge, regardless of the circumstances. In a town separate from the crime, the trial is likely to be centered more upon the facts.
5. If he is found innocent of voluntary manslaughter, then he must remain in the city until the death of the great priest (whom we normally call the High Priest). Obviously, this could take a long time. The purpose here is also fairly obvious. Just because a person is acquitted of involuntary manslaughter, this does not mean that he can return to the home town of the victim and lead a normal life. If anything, that is an accident waiting to happen.
6. Once the High Priest dies, then enough time will have passed for him to return to his home town and to his own house.

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What is the spiritual application?

1. Not everything in the Old Testament has an exact spiritual application. However, we can draw an analogy here.
2. One of the common objections made to the way our life is, is that we did not choose to be born fallen. We were born fallen and we commit acts of sin based upon that. This is the case of the person guilty of involuntary manslaughter. He did not intentionally do it, but it happened. Just what can he do now?
3. We must flee to a new city or a new place, outside of what we know. For the person spoken of here in context, it is a city of refuge. We flee to Jesus Christ, Who is our Refuge. **Jehovah is his refuge** (Psalm 14:6b). **God is our refuge and our strength; a very present help in trouble** (Psalm 46:1).
4. We throw ourselves at the mercy of Jesus Christ and we remain in the city of the Levites until the death of the High Priest.
5. The death of the High Priest refers to the death of Jesus Christ upon the cross. It is His death which freed the Israelites of the Old Testament from their sins, including the sins that they did not choose intentionally to commit and those that they simply committed because they were born with an old sin nature.
6. For those in the Old Testament, the city of asylum was a place to stay over until the death of the High Priest. Similarly, they were protected from the punishment which was due them if they believed in Jesus Christ prior to the crucifixion. At His death, they were justified in time.

“ To flee there a manslayer, a striker of a soul without intention, with no knowledge, and they [the cities] will be to you for a asylum from an redeemer of the blood.

Joshua
20:3

“ There a person guilty of unintentional manslaughter may flee and these cities will be a asylum for them from an avenger of their blood.

Let's see how others have rendered this:

The Emphasized Bible

...that a manslayer who slayeth a person by mistake unwittingly may flee thither, so shall they be unto you for refuge from the blood-redeemer,...

NASB

...that the manslayer who kills any person unintentionally, without premeditation, may flee there, and they shall become your refuge from the avenger of blood.

Young's Lit. Translation ...for the fleeing thither of a man-slayer smiting life inadvertently, without knowledge; and they gave been to you for a refuge from the redeemer of blood.

The problem is not what this means but to get a couple of the words straight. The second verb is the Hiphil participle of *nâkâh* (נָכַח) [pronounced *naw-KAWH*] which means *smite, assault, hit, strike*. Strong #5221 BDB #645. What he strikes is *a soul*. Both Hiphil participles (the first two verbs) are really used as nouns. Then we have a description of how he *strikes* this person. We have the *bêyth* preposition and the feminine singular of *sh°gâgâh* (שֶׁגַּגְּהָה) [pronounced *sh'gaw-GAWH*], found in this passage for the first time in God's Word. This is a noun which modifies either the word *sin* (Lev. 5:15 Num. 15:27) or a particular sin (Num. 35:11, 15). *Unknowingly* is a good translation, but not exactly fit several passages, such as Num. 35:11, 15 Joshua 20:3, 9. When we speak of unintentional manslaughter (as the passages named do), a good translation is *unwittingly, unintentionally*. We should stick with *unknowingly* when dealing with committing sins when we do not realize that they are sins. BDB #993 Strong's #7684. This is followed by another *bêyth* preposition, a negative particle and the feminine singular noun *da'ath* (דַּאֲת) [pronounced *DAH-ath*] means *knowledge*. However, in this passage and elsewhere, it is obvious that the manslayer realizes what he has done. A manslayer does not flee if he does not realize that he has killed someone. So therefore, the *vêyth* preposition and the negative together with this word mean *unintentionally*. Strong's #1847 BDB #395.

The second to the last word in this verse is the Qal active participle of *gâ'al* (גָּאֵל) [pronounced *gaw-AHL*], the verb for *redeem, purchase*. In the participle, we will render this *redeemer*. Strong's #1350 BDB #145. For the *redeemer of blood*, see Num. 35:19–27 Deut. 19:6, 12 II Sam. 14:11. We covered the **Doctrine of the Redeemer** back in Num. 35:19.

McGee points out that several primitive peoples have had a similar protection for their citizenry as these cities of refuge. *In the Hawaiian Islands, on the Kona coast of the Big Island, there is a place known as the City of Refuge. It was in use back in the days before Christianity come to the Islands, when the tribes were slaying each other and even offering human sacrifices. It is there as a tourist attraction today.*²

“ ‘And He will flee unto one from the cities the these and he will stand [in an] entrance of a gate of the city and he will speak in ears of elders of the city the that words of his and they will transport him [into] the city unto them and they will give him a place and he will remain with them.

Joshua
20:4

“ ‘Then he will flee to one of these cities and take a stand at the entrance to the city. He will tell his side of the story to the elders of the city and then will then bring him into the city and give him a place where he will remain.

We have the Qal perfect of the verb *to flee*, but then it is followed by the preposition meaning *unto*, the numeral *one*, and then the *mîn* preposition, which means *from, away from*. What this means is that out of these cities, or our from these six cities to be named, he will flee to one of them.

The second verb is the Qal perfect of a verb we've seen several times in this book: *âmad* (אָמַד) [pronounced *gaw-MAHD*], which means *to take a stand, to stand, to remain, to endure*. Strong's #5975 BDB #763. The traditional place for public forums, town meetings, certain legal transactions and courts was at the entrance of the gates of the city (Gen. 23:10–11 Ruth 4:1–15 Job 29:7).

One of the verbs near the end is the Qal perfect of *âçaph* (אָצַף) [pronounced *aw-SAHF*], which means *transfer, transport, relocate, gather, to gather and remove, to remove*. Strong's #622 BDB #62.

The final verb is the Qal perfect of *yâsha'v* (יָשָׁב) [pronounced *yaw-SHAH^BV*] and it means *to remain, sit, dwell*. Strong's #3427 BDB #442. Barnes summarizes: *As soon as the manslayer presented himself at the city of refuge, the elders of the city were to hold an inquiry, and receive him provisionally into the city. Afterwards, when*

² J. Vernon McGee, *Joshua Judges*, ©1976 by Thru the Bible Books; p. 89.

*the avenger of blood should have tracked his victim to the city, and appear to claim him, a more formal and thorough investigation (v. 6) was to be made.*³

The purpose of this first hearing was to determine whether or not there should be a second. It was a preliminary trial to get whatever evidence or testimony that the accused had to offer. If he could not make a case for his innocence of murder with intent as the only one testifying, then certainly he would be unable to prove his innocence in a formal hearing.

“ ‘And when pursues a redeemer of blood after him and they will not deliver over the manslayer into his hand because in not a knowledge he struck down his neighbor and no hating him from yesterday three days ago.

Joshua
20:5

“ ‘And when the redeemer of blood pursues after him, the elders will not hand over the manslayer to him because he killed his neighbor unintentionally without malice of forethought.

Like the previous verses, the understanding of what is being said is fairly easy. We’ve going to touch on a few of the nuances of the Hebrew. After *redeemer of blood* we have the preposition *ʿachar* (אָחַר) [pronounced *ah-KHAHR*], and it essentially means *after*. Strong’s #310 BDB #29. It is a favorite of Joshua’s. With the preposition is a 3rd person masculine singular suffix.

The next verb comes with a negative and is the Hiphil imperfect of *çâgar* (אָחַר) [pronounced *saw-GAHR*] which means *shut up, to close up*; in the Hiphil, it means *to deliver over*. Strong’s #5462 BDB #688. The person is identified with the Qal active participle of *râtsach* (רָצַח) [pronounced *raw-TSAHKH*] and this word means *murder, slay*. In the Qal active participle, the proper translation is *murderer* when the act was intentional and *manslayer* when the act was unintentional. Strong’s #7523 BDB #953.

What follows are words which substantiate that this was unintentional. We have the conjunction *kîy* (כִּי) [pronounced *kee*], which means *when, that, for, because*. Strong’s #3588 BDB #471. Then we have the preposition *in*, a negative particle and the feminine singular of *da’ath* again, which means *unintentionally*. Strong’s #1847 BDB #395.

After *neighbor*, we have the *wâw* conjunction (speaking of which, throughout this chapter we have many more *wâw* conjunctions that *wâw* consecutives, which is Joshua’s favorite connective); a negative and the Qal active participle of *sânê’* (אָנִי) [pronounced *saw-NAY*] and this verb means *to hate*; in the participle, it is *the ones hating*. Strong’s #8130 BDB #971. Then we have two adverbs of time which follow the *mîn* preposition. They are variously translated *in times past [lit., yesterday three days ago]* (Owen); *hitherto* (Young); *formerly* (KJV); *afortime [literally, yesterday—the third]* (Rotherham); and *beforehand* (NASB). The modern way to render all of this is *unintentionally without malice of forethought*.

“ ‘And he will remain in the city the that until a standing of his before faces of the congregation for the judgment until a death of the priest the great who is in the days the those. Then will return the manslayer and he will go unto his town and unto his home unto the town which he fled from there.’ ”

Joshua
20:6

“ ‘And he will remain in that city until he stands before the congregation in a formal trial; and, if acquitted of pre-meditated murder, then he will remain until the death of the high priest in those days. Then the manslayer will be allowed to return to his town and back to his own home in the town from whence he fled.’ ”

What is important to note is that, in order to gain entrance into the town, the manslayer has to convince the elders; however, that is not the end of it. He is put on trial and they decide. You must realize that any town does not want to have within it a killer, so he won’t be automatically acquitted. The people that he stands before are called *ʿêdâh*

³ Barnes’ Notes, Volume 2, reprinted 1996 by Baker Books; p. 401.

(הַדָּרִי) [pronounced ḡā-DAWH], which should be translated *company, congregation, assembly*. Strong's #5712 BDB #417.

The death that he must await is that of the priest who is further modified by the definite article masculine singular adjective *gādōwl* (גָּדוֹל) [pronounced *gaw-DOHL*], which means *great* (in magnitude, extent and number). It can refer to *the eldest* in a family and it can refer to being great in terms of power, nobility, and wealth. Here, it should be rendered *the great priest* (not, *the high priest*). Owen goes with *the high priest*, as does Rotherham, NASB, NIV and the KJV. Young translates this *chief priest*, which is more correct. We are not speaking necessarily of the *high priest* of the land, but probably of that city. We find this particular word in the Pentateuch so used in two passages only; the parallel passage to this in Num. 35; and in Lev. 21:10. On the other hand, we don't find the term *high priest* anywhere else anyway, so going with that rendering is not a real problem. Strong's #1419 BDB #152.

McGee: *In Israel, a murderer would be stoned to death. If in our society we had capital punishment for murder, with no ifs and ands about it, and the man who was guilty was executed quickly, it would save countless lives. We wouldn't be seeing out police officers shot down or storekeepers held up and murdered without mercy. My friend, God knows human nature. This was His law. However, if one killed another unintentionally, without premeditation, he is to be provided protection. There is an example given in Scripture of two men out in the woods, cutting down a tree. The axe head comes off the handle and strikes one of the men and kills him. Suppose the brother of the slain man says, "I now that man had it in for my brother. He did that purposely. I'm going to kill him!" That man wouldn't have a chance unless there was a place of refuge. So the man who had been responsible for the death would be given the opportunity of running to one of the cities of refuge.*⁴

Now, a lot of the previous three verses are missing in the Greek translation of the Bible.

The Hebrew Massoretic text:

" 'To flee there a manslayer, a striker of a soul without intention, with no knowledge, and they [the cities] will be to you for a asylum from an redeemer of the blood. And He will flee unto one from the cities the these and he will stand [in an] entrance of a gate of the city and he will speak in ears of elders of the city the that words of his and they will transport him [into] the city unto them and they will give him a place and he will remain with them. And when pursues a redeemer of blood after him and they will not deliver over the manslayer into his hand because in not a knowledge he struck down his neighbor and no hating him from yesterday three days ago. And he will remain in the city the that until a standing of his before faces of the congregation for the judgment until a death of the priest the great who is in the days the those. Then will return the manslayer and he will go unto his town and unto his home unto the town which he fled from there.' "

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20:3-6

The Greek Septuagint:

" 'A refuge to the slayer who has struck a man down unintentionally; and the cities will be to you a refuge, and the manslayer will not be put to death by the avenger of blood until he stand before the congregation for judgement.' " [vv. 4-6 are mostly missing from β but found in α]

We really don't have any additional material here in the Hebrew which has not been mentioned before. It is a tough call to determine if someone included the additional information to show what a good Bible student he was,

⁴ J. Vernon McGee, *Joshua Judges*, ©1976 by Thru the Bible Books; p. 90.

or if some one eliminated these several verses because they contained information which had been covered in greater detail in Numbers and Deuteronomy.

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Particular Cities Are Set Apart as the Cities of Asylum

And so they set apart Kedesh in Galilee in [the] hill country of Naphtali; and Shechem in [the] hill country of Ephraim; and Kiriath-arba (that Hebron) in [the] hill country of Judah.

Joshua
20:7

And so they set apart Kedesh of Galilee, which is in the hill country of Naphtali; and Shechem, which is in the hill country of Ephraim; and Kiriath-arba (or, Hebron), which is in the hill country of Judah.

Because these cities often have names which are the same as cities elsewhere, they are given a fuller description here. These are the cities which we have already covered in the previous five chapters. What we do have in this verse is a play on words. The verb for *set apart* is the Hiphil imperfect of *qâdash* (קָדַשׁ) [pronounced *kaw-DAHSH*], which means *consecrate, sanctify, dedicate, hallow, set apart*. Strong's #6942 BDB #872. This is followed by the name of the city, which is *qedesh* (קִדְשׁ) [pronounced *KEH-desh*], which obviously comes from the verb *to set apart, to consecrate, to sanctify*. Strong's #6943 BDB #873.

You will recall that there is a spiritual significance which should be attached to Shechem as well. Shechem is the city which lies between Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim—the mountains of cursing and blessing. Shechem was also the place where Jehovah appeared to Abraham and promised to give his descendants the land that they were in. Abraham built an altar to God here (Gen. 12:6–7). Hebron is where Sarah, Abraham's wife, died (Gen. 23:2). In fact, much of Abraham's family was buried there (Gen. 49:29–32). The cities were spread apart so that Kedesh was in the far north; almost as north as that plot of ground was that the tribe of Dan will later take. Shechem is in Ephraim, in the center of Israel; and Hebron is midway down the Salt Sea, a fourth of the way to the Mediterranean Sea.

And from beyond to the Jordan-Jericho, eastward, they appointed Bezer in the wilderness in the plain from a tribe of Reuben; and Ramoth in the Gilead from a tribe of Gad; and Golan in the Bashan from the tribe of Manasseh.

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20:8

And on the other side of the Jordan, they designated Bezer in the wilderness-plain of Reuben; and Ramoth in Gilead, which belonged to Gad; and Golan in Bashan, which belonged to the tribe of Manasseh.

I am surprised that three cities were taken from both sides of the Jordan; I would have certainly thought four cities on the west and two on the east. However, these three cities were set aside by Moses, back in Deut. 4:41–43: *Then Moses set apart three cities across the Jordan eastward, that a manslayer might flee there, who unintentionally struck down his neighbor without having enmity toward him in time past; and by fleeing to one of these cities he might live; Bezer in the wilderness on the plateau for the Reubenite, and Ramoth in Gilead for the Gadites, and Golan in Bashan for the Manassites.*

Unlike the cities on the west, the cities on the east did not enjoy the same sort of spiritual history. Golan would be found even with the Sea of Kinnereth, in the midst of east Manasseh; Ramoth is found in the northern portion of Gad; and Bezer is found in the northern portion of Reuben, almost even with the northern portion of the Salt Sea. Ramoth-Gilead later fell into the hands of the Syrians (I Kings 22:1–3).

These were cities designated to all of the sons of Israel and to the stranger, the sojourner in their midst to flee there. Any of a stranger of a soul in unintentionally and he will not die in the hand of a redeemer of the blood until his standing before faces of the congregation.

Joshua
20:9

These were the cities which had been designated to all of the sons of Israel, as well as to the visitor and the temporary resident to flee to. Anyone guilty of involuntary manslaughter will not die in the hand of the blood avenger until he has the chance to stand before the court.

After the *bêyth* preposition, we again have a word to describe the slaying, the feminine singular of *sh'gâgâh* (שִׁגְגָה) [pronounced *sh'gaw-GAWH*], which means *unwittingly, unintentionally*. BDB #993 Strong's #7684.

One of the most amazing things about the Bible is the protection afforded those who, in neighboring countries, would have no such protection. Israel was a beacon of light to the other nations and those who believed in Jesus Christ often came to Israel as a part of their faith in Jehovah Elohim. Therefore, God saw to it that they were treated equally under the law. We find similar passages in Lev. 19:33–36 and Deut. 10:18–19.

At this point in his teaching, McGee quoted *How firm a Foundation*, written by George Keith, and played at the beginning of his radio show:

How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord
Is laid for your faith in His excellent Word!
What more can He say than to you He hath said,
To you who for refuge to Jesus have fled?

*Have you fled to Jesus for refuge? There is protection there. What a wonderful chapter this is!*⁵

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⁵ J. Vernon McGee, *Joshua Judges*, ©1976 by Thru the Bible Books; p. 92.