

Homiletics Analysis: Joshua 20

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Joshua 20 records the LORD's command to Joshua to designate the cities of refuge — a provision first anticipated in the law of Moses (Numbers 35; Deuteronomy 19) and now formally established in the land. Six cities are named and distributed across the territory: Kedesh in Galilee, Shechem in Ephraim, Kiriath-arba (Hebron) in Judah on the west side of the Jordan; and Bezer, Ramoth in Gilead, and Golan in Bashan on the east side. The legal mechanism is clear: a person who kills another unintentionally — without premeditation, without prior enmity — may flee to one of these cities, stand before the elders at the city gate, state his case, and be received. He remains there under protection until he has stood before the congregation for judgment, and until the death of the high priest, after which he may return to his own city. The avenger of blood is restrained so long as the manslayer remains within the city. The chapter closes with the simple note that these six cities were set apart for all the people of Israel and for the stranger sojourning among them — provision extended not merely to the covenant people but to those dwelling among them.

This Text — Intent

God is not merely completing an administrative checklist of land distribution. Through this specific institution, He is demonstrating that He governs Israel as a just and merciful King — a God who distinguishes the guilty from the innocent, who does not allow vigilante justice to substitute for deliberate judgment, and who provides a refuge that is genuinely accessible to the one who needs it. The intent is to impress upon Israel — and through Israel, upon every reader — that the God of the covenant is a God who both upholds justice (the innocent must be protected; the guilty must be held accountable) and provides mercy (the one who has done no wrong must have a place to run). The institution itself is a lived parable of the character of the God who ordained it.

Subject Sentence: God establishes appointed cities of refuge — justice and mercy structured into the land itself.

Primary Claim: The LORD orders Israel's life in the land so that both justice and mercy are institutionally secured — demonstrating that He is a God who will not collapse these two into each other, and who ensures the innocent always have somewhere to flee.

Interpretive Evaluation

The typological question — cities of refuge as a type of Christ

The most significant interpretive issue in Joshua 20 is whether the cities of refuge function typologically, pointing forward to Christ as the ultimate refuge for the sinner. This reading has a long and respected history in Reformed exposition — Calvin himself draws on it, as does Jonathan Edwards, and it is reflected in a significant strand of Reformed homiletics. The logic runs as follows: as the manslayer fled to the city for protection from the avenger of blood, so the sinner flees to Christ for protection from the just wrath of God; as the manslayer found safety only within the city's boundaries, so safety is found only in Christ; as the death of the high priest released the manslayer to return home, so the death of the great High Priest (Christ) releases the believer into full and final freedom.

This reading must be evaluated at two levels. *Acknowledged*: the typological instinct here is not arbitrary. The institution of refuge does display patterns — innocent protection, a designated place of safety, a mediating figure (the high priest) whose death effects release — that resonate meaningfully with the gospel. The New Testament itself presents Christ as our refuge (Hebrews 6:18 uses the very language of “fleeing for refuge”), and the broader Mosaic sacrificial and institutional system is explicitly typological in Hebrews 9-10. The instinct to read OT institutions christologically is not imported — it is demanded by the New Testament's own hermeneutic.

Qualified, however: the typology must be handled with precision. The manslayer in Joshua 20 is explicitly *innocent of intentional murder* — he killed someone without premeditation or prior enmity. The city of refuge does not protect the guilty murderer; it protects the one whom the text itself treats as not deserving death. If the type is pressed too directly, it breaks down: the sinner who flees to Christ is not innocent — he is the guilty party who deserves the avenger's judgment. The typology is real but asymmetrical. What the city of refuge provides institutionally — a structured place of protection, legally established, accessible to all who flee — anticipates what Christ provides salvifically, but the correspondence is analogical, not one-to-one. Expositively, the typological application enriches but must not be allowed to override the passage's own first-order theological claim: that the God of Israel is a God who builds both justice and mercy into the structures of His people's common life.

The moralistic reduction

A secondary interpretive pitfall — more homiletical than hermeneutical — is reducing the passage to a lesson in social ethics: “God cares about due process,” “God protects the vulnerable,” “we should build just institutions.” This reading captures something true but misses the theological center. The cities of refuge are not primarily an Israelite social policy — they are a theological statement about the character of the God who ordains them. The Clowney/anti-moralism principle applies here: the passage is not first about what Israel should do but about who the LORD is.

The Reformed verdict

The Reformed reading holds that Joshua 20 is first a theological passage — a revelation of the character of the covenant LORD as simultaneously just (the guilty will be judged; the avenger of blood is real) and merciful (the innocent have a refuge; the provision is accessible to all who flee). The typological reading of the cities as pointing forward to Christ is legitimate and enriching when handled with the asymmetrical precision noted above. The moralistic social-ethics reading is not wrong, but it is insufficient — it stops at the institution without reading through to the Institutor.

Key Canonical Support

- **Numbers 35:9-34** — The original Mosaic legislation establishing the principle of cities of refuge, with the full legal framework; Joshua 20 is the enactment of what Numbers 35 commanded. The theological weight of mercy and justice in Numbers 35 undergirds what Joshua 20 implements.
 - **Deuteronomy 19:1-13** — Moses' reiteration of the refuge provision before Israel enters the land, emphasizing that innocent blood must not be shed in the land the LORD is giving them. The land itself has a moral character — it must not be defiled by unjust bloodshed.
 - **Hebrews 6:17-20** — The New Testament explicitly uses the language of “fleeing for refuge” to describe the believer's relationship to the hope set before us in Christ, who is the anchor of the soul within the veil. This is the canonical echo that most directly connects the institution to its christological fulfillment.
 - **Psalms 46:1** — “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.” The institutional provision of cities of refuge in Israel's land-life is a concrete, geopolitical expression of the theological reality the Psalms declare about the LORD's own character as refuge.
 - **Romans 3:25-26** — God's display of His righteousness in the propitiation of Christ — that He might be both just and the justifier — is the ultimate answer to the tension the cities of refuge held in tension: justice maintained, mercy provided. The cross is where these two meet at their highest register.
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Aim: To show that Joshua 20 is not administrative residue from the conquest but a theologically dense disclosure of the LORD's character — a God who builds both justice and mercy into the very geography of His people's life, anticipating the ultimate refuge He will provide in Christ.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1-2	The LORD speaks to Joshua: “Say to the people of Israel, appoint the cities of refuge, of which I spoke to you through Moses.”	Command rooted in prior Mosaic instruction — this is fulfillment, not invention. Continuity of divine intention.
3	Purpose stated: that the manslayer who kills any person without intent or unknowingly may flee there and find refuge from the avenger of blood.	The legal category is precise: unintentional, unknowing. Not all killing — not guilty murder.
4	Procedure at the city gate: the manslayer shall flee, stand before the elders, state his case, and be received and given a place.	The gate is the place of legal process. The elders must hear — there is a legal hearing, not automatic admission or automatic rejection.
5	If the avenger pursues, the city shall not give the manslayer up — because the killing was without enmity and not premeditated.	The city’s protection is legally grounded. The protection is real, not nominal.
6	The manslayer shall remain until standing before the congregation for judgment, and until the death of the high priest. After that, he may return to his city.	Two conditions: (1) congregational hearing; (2) death of the high priest. The latter is the terminal condition for release.
7	Three cities set apart west of the Jordan: Kedesh in Galilee (Naphtali), Shechem in Ephraim, Kiriath-arba/Hebron in Judah.	Geographic distribution: north, center, south. Accessibility for all regions.
8	Three cities designated east of the Jordan (previously assigned by Moses): Bezer in Reuben, Ramoth in Gilead (Gad), Golan in Bashan	East-bank distribution mirrors west-bank — provision is symmetric and comprehensive across the whole land.

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
9	(Manasseh). Summary: these were the cities appointed for all the people of Israel and for the stranger sojourning among them.	The provision is not ethnically restricted — it extends to the sojourner. This is remarkable and theologically significant.

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1-3	The Command and Its Ground — The LORD Speaks, Recalling Mosaic Precedent
2	4-6	The Mechanism — How Refuge Works: Legal Procedure and Conditions of Release
3	7-8	The Cities — Six Named, Distributed Across the Whole Land
4	9	The Scope — All Israel and the Stranger Among Them

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: God establishes appointed cities of refuge — justice and mercy structured into the land itself.

Primary Claim: The LORD orders Israel's life in the land so that both justice and mercy are institutionally secured — demonstrating that He is a God who will not collapse these two into each other, and who ensures the innocent always have somewhere to flee.

Applications (Five)

1. Recognize that the God of the Bible is not forced to choose between justice and mercy — He refuses to sacrifice either. (*Mind/belief*) The cities of refuge exist because the LORD will not allow vigilante vengeance to substitute for deliberate justice, *and* will not allow an innocent person to die because due process was slow. Both impulses are His —

He is not a God who leans merciful and awkwardly tolerates justice, nor a God who leans judicial and grudgingly extends mercy. Joshua 20 demands a reframing of how we think about God's character: these are not competing attributes He must manage, but twin expressions of who He is. Where you have privately assumed that God's mercy comes at the cost of His justice (or vice versa), this passage calls you to repent of that half-God and receive the whole one.

2. Feel the weight of what it means that God builds accessibility into His provision of refuge. (*Affections/worship*) Six cities. Distributed north, south, center, east, and west. For the Israelite and the sojourner alike. The LORD did not put one city of refuge in a remote location and require an arduous journey. He distributed the provision so that wherever you were in the land, you were never impossibly far from a place to run. This is not administrative efficiency — it is pastoral love, built into the legal geography of the nation. Let this produce gratitude: the God who ordered Israel's land ordered it so that His provision of refuge was near. That same God, in Christ, has not left His people far from the only One who can shelter them.

3. Stop running to refuges that cannot hold you. (*Affections/worship*) The manslayer who ran to the wrong place — or stayed out in the open — died. The protection was real only within the designated city. Israel was surrounded by nations with their own refuges: their gods, their fortifications, their alliances. But only the cities the LORD appointed could do what refuge requires: actually hold you against the avenger. The application is diagnostic — what are you running to for protection that the LORD has not appointed? Reputation? Financial security? Relational approval? These cities cannot hold. They look like cities; they are not cities of refuge. Name the false refuge, and run from it to the one the LORD has designated.

4. Trust that God's legal processes are neither arbitrary nor bypassed — He hears cases before He renders verdicts. (*Mind/belief*) The manslayer did not simply arrive at the gate and find the doors open or shut by random chance. He stated his case. The elders heard it. The congregation judged it. God's provision of refuge is inseparable from God's commitment to truth and due process — the innocent are received because they are actually heard, not because the system rubber-stamps everyone who shows up. For those who fear that God is either a God who condemns without hearing or a God who accepts without discernment, Joshua 20 corrects both errors: He hears, and He judges rightly. Bring your case to Him; He is not a God who turns you away unheard.

5. Extend the provision of refuge to those among you who are not yet your people. (*Will/behavior*) Verse 9 is not an asterisk — it is a theological declaration: the cities were for all the people of Israel *and for the stranger sojourning among them*. The sojourner, the outsider, the one not yet fully part of the covenant community — the LORD's provision covered them too. This has concrete implications for how the church structures its life: the refuge we have found in Christ is not a private reserve for the already-belonging. Those on the edges, the not-yet-in, the spiritually displaced — they are exactly the ones the LORD

built provision for. Consider what it would mean for your congregation's actual practices to reflect a God whose cities of refuge included the stranger.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Joshua 20 teaches that the LORD is a God whose character is simultaneously and inseparably just and merciful — and that He is not content to merely *declare* this but builds it into the structures of His people's life together. The institution of refuge is a revelation: the God who ordains these cities is a God who takes innocent life seriously (mercy) and who takes due process seriously (justice). He distinguishes between the intentional murderer and the accidental manslayer — a distinction that requires moral precision and genuine care for both the dead and the living. The extension of this provision to the sojourner (v.9) further reveals that the LORD's justice and mercy are not ethnically bounded — they belong to His character, not merely to His covenant arrangements with one people. The cities of refuge are a permanent testimony that wherever God rules, both the wrongly accused and the truly guilty are treated differently from one another, and that provision for the innocent is always structurally available.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Joshua 20 contributes to the Reformed understanding that law and grace are not opposed but coordinate — both emerge from the same God who is holy and merciful, and both serve His redemptive purposes. The cities of refuge anticipate the ultimate provision of refuge in Christ (Hebrews 6:17-20), not as a one-to-one allegory but as an institutional foreshadowing: as the LORD built accessibility into the land-structure of Israel's life, so He has built accessibility into the gospel — the one who flees to Christ finds genuine protection, not nominal safety. Reformedly significant is also the death-of-the-high-priest condition (v.6): within the typological trajectory, it is precisely the death of the great High Priest that effects release and return. Christ's death does not merely *open* the refuge — it terminates the exile and grants the redeemed full and permanent return to their inheritance. Joshua 20 thus stands within the larger covenant-of-grace narrative as a concrete, land-level display of what the covenant God is always doing: providing a way for the innocent — and ultimately, by grace, for the guilty — to stand before Him without condemnation.

Main Takeaway

The LORD who gave Israel six cities of refuge — distributed across the whole land, open to every resident including the stranger — is the same God who gives His people Christ. He has never been a God content to let the one who needs a refuge wander without one. He

builds refuge into the structures of His people's life, He extends it beyond the borders of the already-belonging, and He grounds its permanence in the death of a High Priest. This is who God is: not forced to choose between justice and mercy, and not willing to leave you without a place to run.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Treating the chapter as administrative filler.** Joshua 20 is brief and procedural in tone, and it is tempting to treat it as transitional material between more theologically dense chapters — a legal footnote to be acknowledged and moved past. This misreads the chapter's function entirely. The cities of refuge are a theological institution, not a bureaucratic detail. Preach the Institutor through the institution; do not skip the institution to get to more interesting material.
- **Pressing the typology too hard or too precisely.** The cities of refuge do point forward to Christ, and that connection is legitimate and enriching. But the manslayer is explicitly *innocent* of intentional murder — he is not a type of the guilty sinner who deserves judgment. If the typology is preached with mechanical precision, it produces a confused gospel: “you are innocent, so flee to Christ.” The typological connection runs through the institution's structure (designated place, accessible provision, death of the high priest), not through the manslayer's status. Handle the type with care; do not collapse the distinction.
- **Reducing the passage to social ethics.** “God cares about due process” and “God protects the vulnerable” are both true and flow from this text. But preaching that stops there has described the institution without revealing the God behind it. The application must trace back through the institution to the character of the LORD who ordained it. The cities are not primarily a model for human justice systems — they are primarily a revelation of divine character.
- **Ignoring verse 9 — the inclusion of the stranger.** The final verse is not a legal technicality. The fact that the LORD's provision of refuge extended explicitly to the sojourner is theologically remarkable and homiletically rich. A sermon on Joshua 20 that does not reckon with this has missed a significant disclosure of the LORD's character and a significant implication for the church's posture toward those outside it.
- **Missing the death-of-the-high-priest condition.** Verse 6 contains one of the most typologically resonant details in the entire chapter — the manslayer remains until the high priest dies, and then returns freely. Preaching that lists the cities and names the legal procedure without pausing at this condition has omitted the passage's most explicit forward-pointing marker. Even if full typological development is reserved, this condition must be named and its weight acknowledged.

- **Abstracting “refuge” into a generic comfort theme.** The passage is frequently mined for the comfort of knowing God is a refuge (Psalm 46, etc.), but the specificity of Joshua 20 must not be dissolved into generic reassurance. The cities of refuge work because they are *designated, accessible, legally structured, and genuinely protective* — not merely because the word “refuge” appears. Preach the specificity; do not let the passage evaporate into a devotional feeling.