

• Provision for an accidental killer

• Six cities of refuge

God instructs Joshua to set aside six ‘cities of refuge’.¹ Anyone who accidentally kills another person may find refuge there.² If such a tragedy takes place he runs as fast as possible to the nearest ‘city of refuge’ and states his case to the elders at the gate. (The town gate was the place where justice was administered.) If the elders are convinced that there is a possibility that he is not guilty of deliberate murder they must provide safety for him until his case is more fully investigated.³ If he is acquitted he may return home but only after the death of the high-priest.⁴

¹ 20:1–2
² 20:3

³ 20:4–5

⁴ 20:6

Six towns are designated for this purpose in different parts of the country¹ and their purpose is again underlined² The legislation concerning the ‘cities of refuge’ may be considered from two angles.

¹ 20:7–8

² 20:9

1. Cities of refuge as part of Israel’s system of justice

Firstly, **consider the cities as part of Israel’s system of justice.** The law concerning the six cities takes for granted the great wickedness of the crime of murder. In the law of Moses, and even earlier, it is taught that the crime of deliberate murder is worthy of the death penalty. In such a case the family of the murdered person would select a member of the family to avenge the death of their relative. An ‘avenger of blood’¹ was responsible to see that the murderer was executed. At the same time the law of Moses was practical and compassionate. It took seriously the fact that a killing might take place accidentally, and it accepted that at such a time the family of the dead man might not be able to think impartially and calmly. Justice was likely to be withheld from a man who had accidentally killed another. In such a case the killer was allowed to run to one of the ‘cities of refuge’ and there he would be given safety until his case could be heard properly.

¹ 20:2

• Safety until a fair trial could take place

The law of Moses was practical and adapted to the situation in which it was given. One might want to argue that some kind of magistrate should be handling murder cases rather than members of the family who might not be able to think clearly and impartially about the killing of one of their own members. Yet it is part of the genius of the Mosaic law that it took Israelite society as it was, and laid down legislation that suited the actual situation. Private vengeance was the order of the day. The law accepted the situation, used it in the interests of justice, but made provision to prevent its being perverted into a second murder and yet further injustice – the execution of a man who had not willingly committed murder.

• Legislation that suited the actual situation

• The law was less than ideal
• The Christian is not under the law of Moses

The Mosaic legislation is far from ideal. The law was designed to meet the needs of a particular situation. Exaggerated ideas of the sanctity of every aspect of the Mosaic legislation are unwarranted. The Christian is not under the law because life in the Holy Spirit is altogether higher.

2. Cities of refuge – an illustration of the gospel

Secondly, **consider the cities of refuge as an illustration of the gospel.**

The cities were **provided for those who were in danger of death.** Similarly the ‘wages of sin is death’. The sinner is under the threat

• **Danger of death**

of death. In a time of such danger, a refuge was provided. Jesus is a refuge for the sinner. The letter to the Hebrews speaks of 'we ... who have fled for refuge'. ¹ At a time when the sinner is under the sentence of death there is a place for him to run to in order to find refuge and safety.

¹ Hebrews 6:18

• **Straight-forward way**

The way to the place of refuge is straightforward. 'You shall prepare a road', said Deuteronomy 19:3.

• **The way had to be taken**

The way had to be actually taken. A person who did not actually take the road and run for safety would be killed. It was not enough that the way of safety existed. It had to be taken. Similarly Jesus had died, but the fact that He has died for the sins of the world does not in itself save anyone. The way has to be followed. The refuge must be taken or it will not give any refuge!

• **Open gates**

Such places had to have their gates open. The person liable to death was running for his life. It would be terrible for him if he got to the gates and them found them closed. Jesus is the gateway to salvation and the gate is always left open. 'Whoever comes to me I will never thrust out', said Jesus. The gate of refuge is ever open.

• **Open to all nationalities**

The cities were open to any nationality. A non-Israelite living within Israel could make use of the same provision. The city was for 'both for the people of Israel and for the foreigner', said Numbers 35:15.

• **No alternative**

There was no alternative. For the man in danger running for refuge, the city of refuge was his only hope. There was no alternative means for him to survive the threat of execution. Similarly, Jesus is the only way to escape the judgement of sin. There is no alternative. God has no second plan. It is a matter of getting to Jesus or perishing.

• **Total freedom when the high priest died**

Total freedom only came when the high priest died. The person under the threat of death who fled to one of these cities for refuge found total release only when the high-priest of Israel died. Similarly the sinner has release from condemnation and the threat of death because our Lord Jesus, our great high-priest has died. Jesus was a priest; He offered a sacrifice for sin. But in the case of our Lord Jesus Christ, He offered Himself. In ancient Israel the sacrificing priest offered something other than himself, but when Jesus died He was offering Himself as the sacrifice. After the death of Jesus our high- priest, there is total freedom.



slices.org.uk

Dr Michael Eaton is highly respected internationally as a theologian, author, preacher and teacher. He lives in Kenya where he is one of the leaders of the Chrisco Fellowship. His *Preaching Through The Bible* (PTTB) books are highly popular worldwide. Michael Eaton puts the theological and practical meaning of the Bible in a clear and down-to-earth way so that what is written can be easily understood by the reader.



These specially reformatted chapters "Slices of Bread" produced by Sovereign World Trust are available in three categories as set out below

Slices for the Nations	Slices for Sponsors	Slices for Everyone / Slice of the Week
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> For pastors, libraries and colleges in those parts of the world where resources are scarce and unaffordable In the fullness of time the whole series will be made available free of charge Weekly emailings of 3 - 4 Slices or available to download from the Slices web site 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> For those in more prosperous circumstances who can afford to contribute to the development of this material and its distribution with a small monthly donation The same material as Slices for the Nations Weekly emailings of 3 - 4 Slices or by download from the Slices web site 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> For those who wish to sample the material or dip into it from time to time, a proportion of the PTTB series is available free of charge Slices for Everyone (as a download) or Slice of the Week (attached to a weekly email) The remainder of the PTTB material is available to Sponsors and those eligible to receive Slices for the Nations

To subscribe please contact: slicesofbread@sovereignworldtrust.org.uk stating which category fits your situation. Further details are at www.slices.org.uk
 Details of the availability of *Preaching Through The Bible* books and how they may be purchased can be found on www.ibtr.org.uk