

# The Cities of Refuge

Our Old Testament reading for the day, Joshua chapter 20, describes how when the Land was divided amongst the people of Israel, 6 cities were separated to be a refuge for men and women who had unwittingly caused the death of another. The Law was clear, that those who murdered another would be “put to death” themselves (cp Num. 35:16-21). Those who intentionally sought occasion against their brother would pay the ultimate price – forfeiting their own lives. But there would be occasions whereby due to accident, men or women could lose their lives with there being no malice intent. The Law gave some examples of this:

“But if he thrust him suddenly without enmity, or have cast upon him anything without lying of wait, or with any stone, wherewith a man may die, seeing him not, and cast it upon him, that he die, and was not his enemy, neither sought his harm” (Num. 35:22-23)

In such cases there was no intent to cause loss of life, and so different rules applied. “The Avenger of Blood”, a near kinsman of the deceased, could legitimately pursue after, and seek the death of the one by whose hand his relative was lost - but each of the 6 cities of Refuge would provide a safe haven for the unwitting killer to flee to:

“These six cities shall be a refuge, both for the children of Israel, and for the stranger, and for the sojourner among them: that every one that killeth any person unawares may flee thither” (Num. 35:15).

Here, the rules for salvation from the Avenger of Blood were the same for both Jew and Gentile (the stranger). Both come together in their need of saving from death. Regardless of who the killer was, although he be pursued by death (the Avenger of Blood), he could find life and refuge in each one of those cities.

But the Cities of Refuge were not intended to be permanent dwelling places for the accused to dwell in; they rather offered temporary shelter until both his case was heard before the congregation, and also the death of the High Priest. Notice this: it was necessary to have both an acquittal, and also for the life of the High Priest to end, in order for the accused to be given the freedom to return to his home again. In fact, when we look at what was required, we find that there were 7 distinct stages, things that had to be accomplished to secure both life and liberty.

## *1. The Killer approached the Gate seeking admission (Josh. 20:4).*

Being pursued by death, it was only by seeking admission into one of the 6 cities that any hope could be found. In this regard, there is a similarity between the City and the Ecclesia. Just as the killer sought refuge by pleading his case before the elders of the City, so a sinner will seek to obtain salvation by entering into the ecclesia of Christ, awaiting the time of final judgment at his hand. Proverbs 18:10 declares that:

“The Name of Yahweh is a strong tower: the righteous runneth into it, and is safe”

Refuge then, for the righteous, involves entering into the “tower” of Yahweh’s Name. And believers are baptised “into” that Name: “the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” (Mat. 28:19). Yahweh’s Name is a “strong tower” in that it provides refuge to those who would take hold of it, and seek the salvation that it offers. The Master Jesus the Christ is the pre-eminent Name-Bearer, having the “name which is above every name,” (Phil. 2:9) being “a son to continue his Father’s Name for ever” (Psa. 72:17). And the Ecclesia, being the Pillar and Ground of the Truth forms a place for those who are baptised into the Name to find refuge from the storm, and together look for the salvation that is effected by the death of their High Priest.

2. *He shall declare his cause in the ears of the Elders of the City*

Prior to baptism, a believer must give a confession of his faith, and declare his case before the ecclesia. He must confess his sin, and seek Forgiveness before he can enter the ecclesia through baptism. Even so, the slayer who sought refuge had to declare his cause to the Elders, who would then decide whether or not he should be admitted into their midst. Somewhat similar to an interview for Baptism into the Body of Christ, the interrogation sought to establish the truth of the matter, and the state of mind of the unwitting Slayer.

3. *He was taken within the city*

His confession and declaration being accepted by the Elders, he was allowed to enter the City, and so find refuge there from the destroyer. Even so, the Ecclesia, as the “household of faith” will accept into their midst those who would seek refuge in Christ, and take them into themselves. It was the Elders’ responsibility to decide whether or not to accept him, and if they found him guilty of murder, as distinct from being an unwitting slayer, he would be refused entry, and the Avenger of Blood would be allowed to slay him. The only hope for the slayer was for the Elders to believe him, and grant him a place within the city.

The Ecclesia of Christ is itself likened to a City, in the apocalyptic visions to John:

“There came unto me one of the seven Angels ... and talked with me, saying, Come hither, I will shew thee the bride, the Lamb’s wife. And he carried me away in the spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me that great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God ...” (Rev. 21:9-10).

There is a need therefore, for the individual members of the Bride of Christ to keep themselves holy. They must withdraw from those who intentionally trespass against the Law of Liberty, that the “holy Jerusalem” might indeed be “holy” – a city of refuge for those who seek salvation from the greatest man-slayer of all, the *Diabolos*.

#### 4. *And appointed a place*

The Master, who proclaimed himself to be “The Way, The Truth, and The Life” told his disciples: in my Father’s house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. ***I go to prepare a place for you***” (Jno. 14:2).

Notice the Master’s words here: the House of the Father is where there are “mansions”. That implies the House to be also a City, or collection of “mansions” – something that Ezekiel saw in vision (Eze. 40:2). The Father’s House in Scripture, is never said to be in heaven, as some would claim. Rather, it was the Temple at Jerusalem in Old Testament times, and in our day, it is the ecclesia made up of living stones. In the future we are told that there shall once again be a literal building, “a house of prayer for all people” (Isa. 56:7). In Ezekiel, in vision, saw a house of a very great size, resembling that of a city – where there are many mansions for the brethren to dwell in. The Master has gone before, to prepare a place by the means of his Sacrifice, and union with the Father. Notice here, the allusion back to the Angel of Yahweh’s presence as described in Exodus 23:

“Behold, I send an Angel before thee, to keep thee in the way, and to bring thee into the place which I have prepared” (Exo. 23:20).

Just as the Angel went before Israel, ensuring that the enemy would be delivered into their hand, and preparing a place for them to dwell in, even so Messiah – as our forerunner (Heb. 6:20) has gone before, to prepare a place in the Kingdom for those who seek refuge in His Name.

#### 5. *Where he could dwell among them*

Bro HP Mansfield, in commenting on this wrote:

“In the parable, the City of Refuge represented the ecclesia of Christ, and the one seeking admission represented those who recognised their mortality and its cause, and seek redemption therefrom” (Heb. 6:16).

“Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity” wrote the sweet Psalmist of Israel (Psa. 133:1). What a wonderful thing for those of like precious faith to be able to dwell together, hoping together for the day of Christ’s Appearing! But yet there is also a need to beware, lest a root of bitterness might spring up amongst us (Heb. 12:15). As sunken rocks, false brethren can so easily bring shipwreck to those whose faith may be waning, as they preach a different gospel to that taught by Messiah and his Apostles. To dwell amongst the congregation of Messiah’s Brethren is certainly a great privilege, but it also brings responsibilities to ensure the good of all.

#### 6. *The death of the High Priest*

Again, Bro HP Mansfield writes:

“The 5 steps of Grace accomplished, two more (to make 7) remain: 1 the death of the High Priest; and 2. Freedom. On being adjudged innocent of

murder, the killer still had to remain in the city until the death of the High Priest. This, of course, pointed forward to the death of Christ, the antitypical High Priest”

Through the sacrificial death of Messiah, the Avenger of Blood – king sin – has lost it’s power:

“Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same; that through death he might destroy *him that had the power of death*, that is, the *diabolos*” (Heb. 2:14).

Naturally speaking, we are all our lifetime subject to death, and the effects of inheriting a sinful, mortal nature. But Messiah, in taking the great enemy to the Grave has destroyed that which has the power of death, rendering the Serpent venomless. Through Christ Crucified, we see the death of our High Priest, which is essential for our salvation. Even if we are found to be innocent of an intentional specific sin, we are still pursued by the Revenger of Blood, which can legitimately slay us, unless we abide in the house of Refuge of Yahweh’s providing. Our release, coincidental with the removal of the power of death from the Revenger of Blood, can only come about through the death of our High Priest. But notice, the High Priest’s death was only efficacious for those who were *unwitting* sinners. “If we sin wilfully after that we have received the knowledge of the Truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation, which shall devour the adversaries” (Heb. 10:26-27). Let us be instructed, and be wise.

## 7. *Freedom*

So it is then, that “we have a strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us: which hope we have as an anchor to the soul, both sure and steadfast ...” (Heb. 6:18-19). Just as the unwitting slayer fled from the one who had the power of death over him, even so we flee for refuge in the Name of Yahweh – a “high tower” – through faith in the great name-bearer, even Jesus the Anointed. We live, not as those who are still in bondage to sin and death, fearful of the Avenger of Blood, but of those who have been granted life and liberty through faith and hope in the work of Yahweh through our Messiah, His son. Upon us who believe and obey the Gospel-Call, the Avenger of Blood, AKA “The Devil” is rendered powerless. Let us therefore look into the perfect law of liberty, and live as those who are amongst the great congregation of the Redeemed. Seeking salvation and refuge through Messiah, we recognise that all things are possible through his Sacrifice, and memorialise his Offering in the bread and the wine – emblems of his love for us.

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