

The City of Refuge

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Long ago, when the Israelites were headed toward the promised land, the Lord, through Moses, told the people to set apart six cities. These cities were to be designated as cities of refuge. The purpose of these cities was to provide safety. The specific people that it was intended to provide safety for were those who had accidentally killed someone else.

In **Numbers 35**, we can read about some of the specific requirements that went along with these cities. First, they were spread out so that everyone had access to them. Second, they did not keep people from their just punishment. If they had intentionally committed murder, then they were still to be put to death, but they would have a trial first. Third, even if the murder was unintentional, they were required to live their lives in the city of refuge until the death of the current High Priest.

From these verses, we see that when someone was murdered, their next of kin became the avenger of blood, and the avenger of blood could put the murderer to death. This concept goes back to God's covenant with Noah. In **Genesis 9:6**, the Lord states, "*Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image.*" And as the writer of Hebrews reminds us, "*Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.*" (**Hebrews 9:22**)

The cities of refuge are for the protection from the avenger of blood, but the function of the avenger of blood is also important. The avenger of blood upheld the requirements to keep the land from being polluted by the shedding of blood. They were the ones who fulfilled the statement of God. However, throughout the scriptures, there are very few places where the avenger of blood is mentioned or talked about outside **Numbers 35** and **Genesis 9**.

In fact, if you look at the underlying Hebrew, you learn that this word, which is translated 'avenger' in **Numbers 35**, is nearly everywhere else translated as 'redeemer'. He who avenges and he who redeems are the same. And the most common person for this word to refer to is God. We see this in the dual roles that He fulfills. The Lord brings His people out of Egypt, but He also punishes the wicked and grumblers.

We see this most strongly through Jesus Himself. In **Revelation 19**, we see a depiction of the Lord Jesus sitting on a white horse with a robe dipped in blood. From His mouth comes a sword that He will use to strike down the nations, and He will trample out the winepress of the fury of the Lord. As the souls beneath the altar ask, "*O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?*" (**Revelation 6:10**) He answers that it will be a little while longer, but His vengeance is not sleeping. But we also see Jesus as the one who redeems and saves His people through the shedding of his own blood, reconciling all things to Himself, making peace by His blood on the cross. (**Colossians 1:20**)

Indeed, through Him we are able to enter into the Heavenly Jerusalem, the true City of Refuge, where we are safe from the wrath of God. And in this city, we will stay until the death of the High Priest. But our High Priest is the Son of God, who will live forevermore. There is no safe place except within the city that He has designated. But this city is not like the cities of refuge that the Israelites had. They had to travel to get to those. This city is one that we can enter right now and remain on this Earth. This city is one that is not bound by geographical location, for it is a heavenly city.

When we are baptized, we have our debt cancelled (**Colossians 2:9-14**), and this makes us free in a way that we were not before. Our baptism makes us a part of His people, His church, which is the New Jerusalem. This isn't some promise that is far off, but one that is near, which we can lay hold of right now.

But, as with many of the promises of God, there is also a future fulfillment as well. When He comes again, He will take us to the place He has prepared for us. (**John 14:1-3**) This will be a place much grander and greater than what we have here. And at the center of the city will be our Lord. This will be the greatest joy we have ever known, to live with our Lord, with His glory uncovered before us, speaking with us face to face.

Outside the city, the avenger brings terror to all who oppose him, but inside the city, we will find rest for our souls. If we want to be in the city, then we must listen to Him and obey Him. He leaves the choice to us.

Revelation 22:12-13

“Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me, to repay each one for what he has done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.”