



## MESSIAH OUR CITY OF REFUGE

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*“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16)*

John 3:16 is the best-known verse in the Bible, probably because it is the one verse that best summarizes in a nutshell the main message of the Bible. It is a wonderful verse, and many people are familiar with it. Unfortunately, familiarity can lead to misuse. I have seen unrepentant drunkards and fornicators use John 3:16 to try to convince me that they were on their way to heaven, in spite of their refusal to repent of their sins.

“All it says you have to do is believe in Jesus,” they say.

Of course the unrepentant drunkards and fornicators who quote John 3:16 have to ignore the Scripture verses which say that drunkards and fornicators will not inherit the kingdom of God (1 Cor. 6:9f; Gal. 5:19-21).

We cannot isolate one verse of Scripture and divorce it from the rest of the Bible. Doctrinal errors are established when men focus on one verse and ignore everything else the Bible says about the subject they are trying to understand. We must let the Bible define its own terms. When we read John 3:16, we must let the Bible define God, love, believe, etc.

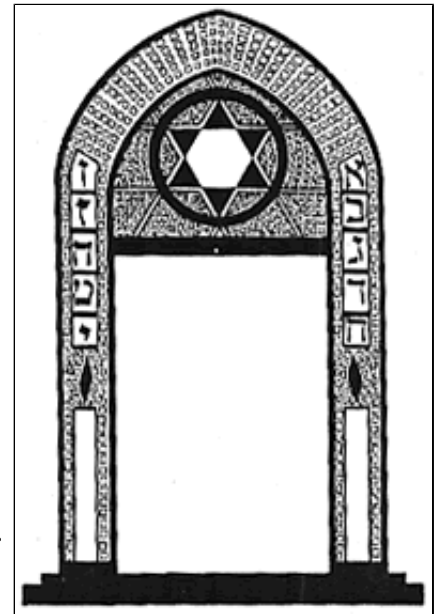
The term in John 3:16 that needs to be clarified is the phrase “believeth in Him.” What does it mean to believe in the Son of God? How does the Bible define the term belief or faith? One thing is certain. Faith without works is dead. The Bible plainly and clearly states this three times so there will be no mistake about how God defines faith. (See James 2:17, 20, 26.) Unrepentant sinners who say they believe in the Son of God have a “faith” that is like that of “the devils [who] also believe, and tremble” (James 2:19).

The only faith God recognizes as genuine is a faith that produces good works. The good works are not a substitute for faith, nor are they the basis or source for faith. The good works are the fruit of faith and the proof of it. Genuine, Biblical faith is always accompanied by repentance. Repentance and faith are often mentioned together in the New Testament. “Repent ye, and believe the gospel” (Mark 1:15); “...repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 20:21); “...repentance from dead works, and of faith toward God” (Heb. 6:1).

A look at the Biblical concept of the cities of refuge can serve as an illustration to clarify what it means to believe in the Messiah. Before the children of Israel went in to possess the Land, the Lord instructed them to designate certain cities to be cities of refuge. (See Numbers 35 & Joshua 20.) These cities, six in number, were walled cities scattered over the land of Israel. If a man killed someone and it was not a case of cold-blooded, pre-meditated murder, the killer could flee to the nearest city of refuge. Here a person who had killed someone accidentally or in self-defense had a place of sanctuary where he would be safe from “the avenger of blood,” i.e., the victim’s family.

It is interesting to note that the number of cities was six. Seven is the Biblical number of perfection and completion. This suggests that the six cities of refuge speak prophetically of a seventh and final City of Refuge. The Messiah Yeshua, Jesus of Nazareth, is our spiritual City of Refuge, the place where we are safe from the enemy of our soul.

There is a story in the Bible about a man who should have taken advantage of God’s provision of a city of refuge, but did not. The story is recorded in 2 Samuel 2. David was king over Judah, and Saul’s son Ish-bosheth was king over the other tribes. Ish-bosheth’s army was led by Abner and David’s army was led by Joab. Abner and his men were fighting against Joab and his men. When Abner realized that defeat was inevitable, he fled the battle. Looking behind him, he saw he was being pursued by Joab’s younger brother Asahel. A young, inexperienced soldier like Asahel was no match



for a veteran fighter like Abner. Knowing this, Abner told Asahel to fight with one of the younger men. “Turn thee aside from following me: wherefore should I smite thee to the ground? How then should I hold up my face to Joab thy brother?” But Asahel refused to heed Abner’s warning, so Abner slew him in self-defense.

In the next chapter we see Abner in and out of the city of Hebron, which happened to be one of the cities of refuge. Then we read about Abner’s death: “And when Abner was returned to Hebron, Joab took him aside in the gate to speak with him quietly, and smote him under the fifth rib, that he died, for the blood of Asahel his brother.”

After Abner’s death King David lamented, “Died Abner as a fool dieth?” The answer is obvious. However wise Abner may have been about some things, he was foolish about one thing. He failed to take advantage of God’s provision of a place to protect him from Joab’s revenge. Abner did not stay inside the gate of Hebron, the city of refuge. He was almost inside. He died on the very threshold of the city gate of Hebron, just inches from safety. He allowed himself to be lured out to unsafe ground where he forfeited his right to legal protection. He was deceived and destroyed by his enemy at the very entrance to the place of safety. Because of a false sense of security, Abner died like a fool.

Hebron was a city of refuge built by men to protect a man’s physical life from a human enemy, but it speaks of a spiritual place “not made with men’s hands,” a place to protect a person’s eternal life from Satan, the enemy of our soul. The only place of safety for the slayer was in the city of refuge; the only place of safety for the sinner is in the Messiah, our City of Refuge.

Just as a man had to enter into a city of refuge to be in the place of safety, so we have to enter into the Messiah to be in the place of safety. We enter into the Messiah by believing into Him. The phrase “believe into Him” sounds more awkward than “believe in Him,” but it is, in fact, a more accurate translation of the phrase as it appears in the Greek text of John 3:16. As a matter of fact, in the very first English translation of the New Testament (in 1380), John Wycliffe translated this phrase in John 3:16 as “whosoever believeth into Him.” Wycliffe translated it this way because the Greek word eis (eiV) means “into.” The Greek word for “in” is en (en). John 3:16 uses eis, not en.

The Greek word eis, like the English word into, carries with it the idea of movement. The use of the word into tells us that the person or object was formerly outside (the house, for example), and has now moved into the house. The difference between into and in may seem minor and nit-picky, but it is of vital importance when we are talking about being in the Messiah. We cannot say we are “in Him” unless we have first “believed into Him,” and moved from being outside the Messiah to being in Him. In the Epistles of the New Testament, the phrase “in Christ [Messiah]” appears dozens of times, but until repentance and faith have carried us over the threshold of the door, we cannot say we are in Him. First we “believe into Him,” then we are “in Him.”

Many people who mistakenly think they are in Messiah are like Abner at the gate of Hebron. Abner is a picture of a man almost there. He typifies multitudes of people who are at the very entrance, but refuse to take that one final step of commitment that will carry them over the threshold. Such people are so close to safety that they develop a false sense of security. They may feel more at home in a church than in a bar or a night club, but they are still on the wrong side of the threshold. Being at the very gate, they look into the city; they see and hear all the activity; perhaps they even talk with Jesus as did many other would-be disciples. It is easy for such people to imagine that they are inside.

“What are you doing, Daniel, trying to make people doubt their salvation?” If a person’s salvation is genuine, these words will not drive him out of the City of Refuge. If anything, my words will drive him deeper into the heart of the City of Refuge. My concern is for those who have an imaginary faith and therefore an imaginary Messiah and an imaginary salvation. A.W. Tozer wrote about such people. “Imagination has been mistaken for faith and has been made to do service for obedience,” Tozer wrote. “There is a mental disease fairly familiar to all of us where the patient lives in a world wholly imaginary. It is a play-world, a world of make-believe, with no objective reality corresponding to it. Everyone knows this except the patient himself. He will argue for his world with all the logic of a sane man, and the pathetic thing is that he is utterly sincere. So we find Christians who have lived so long in the rarefied air of imagination that it seems next to impossible to relate them to reality.”

Died Abner as a fool dieth? Yes, because he was outside the city of refuge. But a person who remains outside the Messiah, the City of Refuge for the soul, is twice the fool Abner was. Abner died only once for his error; those who die outside the Messiah die a second death, called “the lake of fire,” a place of “weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth.”

However unpopular the belief in hell may be, hell has not changed to keep up with the times and the shifting sands of men’s opinions about the afterlife. Regardless of what men think about hell, it cannot be wished away. Its jaws remain open wide to swallow all who continue to sin against a holy God who gave His Son to die that all might have a place of refuge.

Jonathan Edwards, in his famous sermon Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God, pictures people outside the Messiah as people who walk on a thin, rotten covering that is stretched over the fiery pit. “And there are innumerable places in this covering so weak that they won’t bear their weight,” Edwards stated. “And these places are not seen. The arrows of death fly unseen at noonday.” The rotten covering described by Edwards surrounds the City of Refuge and extends all

the way to the entrance. The only solid ground is inside.

Why has God ordained His Son to be the only place of safety? Because His Son took upon Himself the punishment for our sins. And because the sentence has already been carried out upon Him, it will fall no more upon Him, nor upon those who are in Him. The only place of safety is where the fire of God's wrath has already fallen.

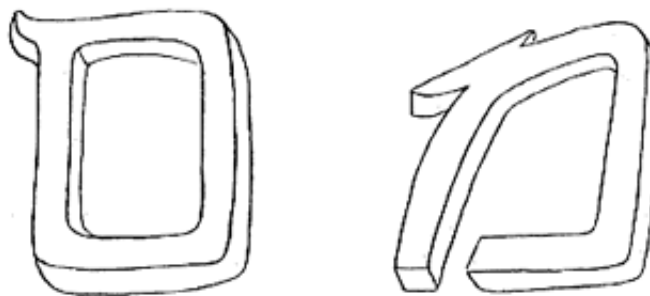
My home state, Illinois, is known as the Prairie State. Years ago when prairie grass covered the flat plains, one of the most dreaded events was a grass fire in the dry season. If a man in a field saw smoke in the distance, he knew the wind would carry the fire to his location in a matter of minutes. There were no trees high enough, no water near enough, and no legs fast enough to escape the fire. There was only one way of escape. With his back to the wind, he started a second fire in the grass and waited for the wind to carry that fire away from him until a burned-out patch of ground was before him. He then stepped into that area, and when the fire reached his location, it simply stopped and died. "Where there is no fuel, the fire goeth out" (Prov. 26:20). So it is with our City of Refuge, the Messiah Yeshua. The only place of safety is where the fire of God's wrath has already fallen.

*"But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and by his stripes we are healed." (Isaiah 53)*

The Hebrew letter mem (מ) can serve as a visual aid to help us picture the Messiah as our City of Refuge. This is appropriate, because the Hebrew word for Messiah, Mashiach (משיח) begins with the letter *mem*. Even in rabbinic thought the mem stands allegorically for *Mashiach*.<sup>1</sup> Shown below are the two forms the letter *mem* can take. The form on the right is called the "open *mem*." This is how the letter appears when it is used at the beginning of a word or in the middle of a word. The form on the left is called the "closed *mem*" or "final *mem*." This form is used only when the *mem* is the very last letter of a word.

Look at the open *mem* below and imagine it as a walled city, our spiritual City of Refuge. The *mem* is open; there is a way to enter into the Messiah and receive the blessing of God. Rabbis see the open *mem* as "[t]he constant outpouring of blessing from His open hand"<sup>2</sup> As long as there is an open door, the sinner can repent and enter into the Messiah. The door will not remain open forever, though. Just as there is a final mem that closes a word, so there will be a final Judgment Day that will close the door of repentance, judge those outside Messiah, and close the books.

In Judaism, God is sometimes referred to by the name *Makom* ("Omnipresent"; literally, "place"). The Hebrew word *Makom* contains an open *mem* at the beginning and a closed *mem* at the end: מקום (read right to left). According to the rabbis, the open *mem* of *Makom* speaks of that part of God which is "open," i.e., that which can be known and understood. The closed *mem* speaks of that which is "closed," i.e., that which is unknowable and hidden and beyond the grasp of our limited, finite understanding.<sup>3</sup> There will always be "the secret things [which] belong unto Yahweh our God" (Deut. 29:29); we will always "know in part" in this life. But to find eternal life and the true knowledge of God, we must enter into the Messiah, our City of Refuge. "And this is life eternal, that they might know Thee the only true God, and Yeshua the Messiah, whom Thou hast sent" (John 17:3).



<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Michael L. Munk, *The Wisdom in the Hebrew Alphabet* (New York: Mesorah Publ., 1994), 146.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*