DEUTERONOMY

Chapter 19

*Cities of Refuge*

**When the Lord your God has destroyed the nations whose land he is giving you, and when you have driven them out and settled in their towns and houses, 2 then set aside for yourselves three cities centrally located in the land the Lord your God is giving you to possess. 3 Build roads to them and divide into three parts the land the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, so that anyone who kills a man may flee there. 4 This is the rule concerning the man who kills another and flees there to save his life—one who kills his neighbor unintentionally, without malice aforethought. 5 For instance, a man may go into the forest with his neighbor to cut wood, and as he swings his ax to fell a tree, the head may fly off and hit his neighbor and kill him. That man may flee to one of these cities and save his life. 6 Otherwise, the avenger of blood might pursue him in a rage, overtake him if the distance is too great, and kill him even though he is not deserving of death, since he did it to his neighbor without malice aforethought. 7 This is why I command you to set aside for yourselves three cities. 8 If the Lord your God enlarges your territory, as he promised on oath to your forefathers, and gives you the whole land he promised them, 9 because you carefully follow all these laws I command you today—to love the Lord your God and to walk always in his ways—then you are to set aside three more cities. 10 Do this so that innocent blood will not be shed in your land, which the Lord your God is giving you as your inheritance, and so that you will not be guilty of bloodshed. 11 But if a man hates his neighbor and lies in wait for him, assaults and kills him, and then flees to one of these cities, 12 the elders of his town shall send for him, bring him back from the city, and hand him over to the avenger of blood to die. 13 Show him no pity. You must purge from Israel the guilt of shedding innocent blood, so that it may go well with you. 14 Do not move your neighbor’s boundary stone set up by your predecessors in the inheritance you receive in the land the Lord your God is giving you to possess.**

**Ch 19** Cf Nu 35. Civil laws regarding homicide, unintentional (vv 4–10) and intentional (vv 11–13); movement of boundary markers (v 14); and perjury (vv 15–21). (TLSB)

**19:1–13** See 4:41–43; Nu 35:9–28; Jos 20. (CSB)

**19:1–3** God establishes cities of refuge: three in the Transjordan (4:43) and three in Canaan after the conquest (v 2). Next of kin would seek blood revenge for a death, and these cities of refuge would ensure due process for the accused, preventing an injustice. They were to be evenly distributed throughout the land so no one would be at a disadvantage. According to Nu 35:6 and Jsh 21:13–36, the six cities of refuge were Levitical cities. (TLSB)

**19:4–6** *kills* … *unintentionally*. An accident with no prior hatred. Capital punishment is not deserved, and a city of refuge would prevent the injustice of an angry avenger striking down the offender. Luther: “Whatever the offense has been, the heart rather than the hand of the offender is to be considered.… If the heart is innocent of hate, the deed is innocent of murder” (AE 9:193–94). (TLSB)

**19:8–10** God had promised, on condition of the peoples’ fidelity to the covenant, that their land would be enlarged (11:22–24). If that happened, three more cities of refuge were to be added to help ensure that innocent blood would not be shed in their land. If innocent blood were shed, the guilt of it would be shared by the community. According to Jgs 2:20–3:4, God revoked the promise of enlarged territory due to Israel’s disobedience. However, Israel did expand greatly under David and Solomon. (TLSB)

**19:11–13** Deliberate, premeditated killing is different (on account of hate), and such a murderer cannot abuse a city of refuge by claiming protection there. This crime, once determined, must be punished. (TLSB)

**19:12** *hand him over*. The elders of his city would demand his extradition and hand him over to the avenger of blood for execution after conviction. (TLSB)

*so that he may die*. Same verb is used of the victim (v 11); thus the punishment fits the crime (see note, v 21). (TLSB)

**19:13** There shall be no mercy for this crime. Shedding of innocent blood was a stain on Israel that had to be removed for their well-being. After all, the Lord dwelled there, and the land was not to be defiled (Nu 35:34). Luth: “Here [vv 11–13] you see that vengeance is assigned to the government” (AE 9:195). Cf Rm 13:1–5. (TLSB)

**19:1–13** God gives statutes covering both unintentional and intentional killings. God has given life—all life, from conception on—and reserves the right to take it. No individual can presume to take life into his or her own hands: “You shall not murder” (5:17). God has given us our own “city of refuge” to which we may flee when the guilt of sin threatens to overwhelm us: His grace in Christ Jesus, whose innocent blood was shed for sinners. There you will find free and full forgiveness—the guilt is purged away! • Almighty God, give to us a respect for all life as a sacred gift from You, no matter how small, no matter how feeble and frail, no matter how young or old. Amen. (TLSB)

**19:14** *boundary stone.* Such stones were set up to indicate the perimeters of fields and landed estates. Moving them illegally to increase one’s own holdings was considered a serious crime. (CSB)

Large stone (or pile of stones) marking the boundary line of someone’s property. Moving a landmark for personal gain was a serious moral offense; since the Lord gave the land, to act fraudulently was to act against Him. Jewish commentators saw this as a command against changing established practices of the elders. (TLSB)

**19:14** God gives each family of His people an allotment of land, and the property boundaries of neighbors are to respected (cf 5:19, 21). God indeed deals bountifully with us to care for our physical needs in this life, but even more so has He given us an inheritance in heaven, secured for us and marked out by Christ Jesus! • Lord God, let us not become enamored by the things of this life but rest secure in the knowledge that You will provide for Your children’s needs. Amen. (TLSB)

*Witnesses*

**15 One witness is not enough to convict a man accused of any crime or offense he may have committed. A matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses. 16 If a malicious witness takes the stand to accuse a man of a crime, 17 the two men involved in the dispute must stand in the presence of the Lord before the priests and the judges who are in office at the time. 18 The judges must make a thorough investigation, and if the witness proves to be a liar, giving false testimony against his brother, 19 then do to him as he intended to do to his brother. You must purge the evil from among you. 20 The rest of the people will hear of this and be afraid, and never again will such an evil thing be done among you. 21 Show no pity: life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.**

**19:15** See note on 17:6. (CSB)

*single witness* … *not suffice*. Protection against a wrongful conviction on the basis of inadequate or false testimony (vv 16–17). Cf 17:6. (TLSB)

**19:17** *before the Lord*. In front of the tabernacle, where God’s presence resided. (TLSB)

**19:18–19** A perjurer is punished with the penalty intended for the accused. (TLSB)

*purge the evil*. Mel: “He wills that the wild ravings of men be held in check and be punished by the penalties imposed by their rules” (Chem, *LTh* 2:437). (TLSB)

**19:18** *giving false testimony.* See 5:20; Lev 19:11–13; 1Ki 21:10, 13. (CSB)

**19:19** *You must purge the evil from among you.* See note on 13:5. (CSB)

**19:20** This law ensured that others would be discouraged from bringing accusations that were questionable or known to be false (cf 5:20). (TLSB)

**19:21** *life for life.* See notes on Ex 21:24–25; Lev 24:20; see also Mt 5:38–42. (CSB)

The law of punishment in kind (*lex talionis*) was merciful. It meant that the punishment must fit the crime—the degree of vengeance could not exceed the degree of original injury. This was not personal vengeance but just punishment following a trial with due process. (TLSB)

**19:15–21** Laws are given concerning witnesses who bring accusations against others, and safeguards concerning them are given to ensure justice. God calls us to deal with one another with integrity, being faithful witnesses for the protection of ourselves or others and never hurting others by bearing false witness against them. Holy Scripture itself is a witness that our God is just; His perfect justice is seen at the cross, where payment was made in full for sin. There, Jesus became a curse for us; the One who knew no sin was made sin for us (2Co 5:21). • Lord, joy fills our hearts at hearing that You sent Your Son to bear our sin for us and open the door of eternal life to us. We pray that Your Holy Spirit would keep us in the faith until the day of redemption. Amen. (TLSB)