

DEUTERONOMY

Chapter 19

Laws Concerning Cities of Refuge

“When the LORD your God cuts off the nations whose land the LORD your God is giving you, and you dispossess them and dwell in their cities and in their houses, 2 you shall set apart three cities for yourselves in the land that the LORD your God is giving you to possess. 3 You shall measure the distances and divide into three parts the area of the land that the LORD your God gives you as a possession, so that any manslayer can flee to them. 4 “This is the provision for the manslayer, who by fleeing there may save his life. If anyone kills his neighbor unintentionally without having hated him in the past— 5 as when someone goes into the forest with his neighbor to cut wood, and his hand swings the axe to cut down a tree, and the head slips from the handle and strikes his neighbor so that he dies—he may flee to one of these cities and live, 6 lest the avenger of blood in hot anger pursue the manslayer and overtake him, because the way is long, and strike him fatally, though the man did not deserve to die, since he had not hated his neighbor in the past. 7 Therefore I command you, You shall set apart three cities. 8 And if the LORD your God enlarges your territory, as he has sworn to your fathers, and gives you all the land that he promised to give to your fathers — 9 provided you are careful to keep all this commandment, which I command you today, by loving the LORD your God and by walking ever in his ways—then you shall add three other cities to these three, 10 lest innocent blood be shed in your land that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance, and so the guilt of bloodshed be upon you. 11 “But if anyone hates his neighbor and lies in wait for him and attacks him and strikes him fatally so that he dies, and he flees into one of these cities, 12 then the elders of his city shall send and take him from there, and hand him over to the avenger of blood, so that he may die. 13 Your eye shall not pity him, but you shall purge the guilt of innocent blood from Israel, so that it may be well with you.

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)

19:1–3 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)

Property Boundaries

14 “You shall not move your neighbor's landmark, which the men of old have set, in the inheritance that you will hold in the land that the LORD your God is giving you to possess.

19:14 *neighbor's landmark*. 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 be 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)

Laws Concerning Witnesses

15 “A single witness shall not suffice against a person for any crime or for any wrong in connection with any offense that he has committed. Only on the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses shall a charge be established. 16 If a malicious witness arises to accuse a person of wrongdoing, 17 then both parties to the dispute shall appear before the LORD, before the priests and the judges who are in office in those days. 18 The judges shall inquire diligently, and if the witness is a false witness and has accused his brother falsely, 19 then you shall do to him as he had meant to do to his brother. So you shall purge the evil from your midst. 20 And the rest shall hear and fear, and shall never again commit any such evil among you. 21 Your eye shall not pity. It shall be life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.

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)

19:20 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*. It 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)