

DEUTERONOMY

Chapter 21

Atonement for Unsolved Murders

“If in the land that the LORD your God is giving you to possess someone is found slain, lying in the open country, and it is not known who killed him, 2 then your elders and your judges shall come out, and they shall measure the distance to the surrounding cities. 3 And the elders of the city that is nearest to the slain man shall take a heifer that has never been worked and that has not pulled in a yoke. 4 And the elders of that city shall bring the heifer down to a valley with running water, which is neither plowed nor sown, and shall break the heifer's neck there in the valley. 5 Then the priests, the sons of Levi, shall come forward, for the LORD your God has chosen them to minister to him and to bless in the name of the LORD, and by their word every dispute and every assault shall be settled. 6 And all the elders of that city nearest to the slain man shall wash their hands over the heifer whose neck was broken in the valley, 7 and they shall testify, ‘Our hands did not shed this blood, nor did our eyes see it shed. 8 Accept atonement, O LORD, for your people Israel, whom you have redeemed, and do not set the guilt of innocent blood in the midst of your people Israel, so that their blood guilt be atoned for.’ 9 So you shall purge the guilt of innocent blood from your midst, when you do what is right in the sight of the LORD.

21:1 *slain*. Hbr “pierced.” Placed the people and the land under blood guilt, so atonement was necessary (cf 19:4–13; Nu 35:33). (TLSB)

21:2 Civil authorities determined the closest city to the slain victim, whose elders would then undertake the legal procedure described in vv 3–8. (TLSB)

21:3–4 *heifer ... valley ... water*. All were undefiled by human use and therefore appropriate for sacred use. (TLSB)

21:4 *break the heifer's neck*. Either ritual atonement or judicial execution; perhaps both. This method was used on the firstborn of impure animals not able to be sacrificed (cf Ex 13:2; 34:20). This action may point to a symbolic, substitutionary execution of the guilty. (TLSB)

21:5 *to minister*. To officiate at the place of worship before the Lord on behalf of the people. (CSB)

Those who minister to the Lord become involved, conducting the prescribed liturgical rubrics. They exercise final judicial authority. (TLSB)

21:6–7 Twofold action by civil authorities from the city. First, they wash their hands, symbolically expressing their innocence. Second, they verbally testify to their innocence and pray to the Lord for forgiveness for Israel (v 8), the basis of which is the grace of God, who had redeemed Israel before. (TLSB)

21:6 *wash their hands*. Symbolic of a declaration of innocence (v. 7; see Mt 27:24). (CSB)

21:8 *atonement*. Spoken twice to emphasize that the whole nation, not just the city nearest the slain person, needed absolution due to collective responsibility for bloodshed in the land. (TLSB)

21:1–9 The Lord provides a sacrifice for an unsolved murder. He emphasizes the value of human life by describing the atonement that must be made for it. In satisfying His divine justice, God sent His own Son into this world to make the expiatory sacrifice, the atonement, for our lives on the cross of Calvary, there

shedding His lifeblood for the guilt of our sins. • Lord Jesus Christ, as You alone are the sacrificial Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, accept our heartfelt repentance for our sins. Wash us in Your blood and clothe us in Your righteousness. We pray in Your holy name. Amen. (TLSB)

Marrying Female Captives

10 “When you go out to war against your enemies, and the LORD your God gives them into your hand and you take them captive, 11 and you see among the captives a beautiful woman, and you desire to take her to be your wife, 12 and you bring her home to your house, she shall shave her head and pare her nails. 13 And she shall take off the clothes in which she was captured and shall remain in your house and lament her father and her mother a full month. After that you may go in to her and be her husband, and she shall be your wife. 14 But if you no longer delight in her, you shall let her go where she wants. But you shall not sell her for money, nor shall you treat her as a slave, since you have humiliated her.

21:10–14 These stipulations for marrying female captives ensure their appropriate moral treatment and consideration for their feelings. (TLSB)

21:10 *against your enemies.* The enemies here are those outside Canaan (see 20:14–15); so the woman (v. 11) could be taken captive and would not be subject to total destruction. (CSB)

21:11 Taking a foreign wife from outside the land was permitted. Cf 20:10–15. (TLSB)

21:12 *shave her head.* Indicative of leaving her former life and beginning a new life, or perhaps symbolic of mourning (v. 13; see, e.g., Jer 47:5; Mic 1:16) or of humiliation. (CSB)

21:14 *humiliated.* Twelve other times the Hebrew for this word is used of men forcing women to have sexual intercourse with them (22:24, 29; Ge 34:2; Jdg 19:24; 20:5; 2Sa 13:12, 14, 22, 32; La 5:11; Eze 22:10–11). (CSB)

If marriage under these circumstances did not work, divorce was permissible. Cf 24:1–4. However, this wife was legally protected. God wanted Israel, in contrast to the nations around them, to treat women with respect and dignity. (TLSB)

21:10–14 Israel is given laws governing the marrying of female captives. God expects Israel to act differently than the world around them. God has established marriage for the good of men and women. The model for this union is that of the Bridegroom, Christ, with His Bride, the Church. For her, He gave Himself up unto death and applied the benefits of His death and resurrection to her in Holy Baptism. We the baptized, the Church, thus stand before God without spot or blemish as the Bride of Christ! • Lord God, as You have created us male and female and instituted marriage to be an intimate blessing to us, lead us to love and respect one another and keep the marriage covenant undefiled through our loving Bridegroom, Christ Jesus. Amen. (TLSB)

Inheritance Rights of the Firstborn

15 “If a man has two wives, the one loved and the other unloved, and both the loved and the unloved have borne him children, and if the firstborn son belongs to the unloved, 16 then on the *day when he assigns his possessions as an inheritance to his sons, he may not treat the son of the loved as the firstborn in preference to the son of the unloved, who is the firstborn, 17 but he shall acknowledge the firstborn, the son of the unloved, by giving him a double portion of all that he has, for he is the firstfruits of his strength. The right of the firstborn is his.

21:16 *in preference to.* The order of birth rather than parental favoritism governed succession, though the rule was sometimes set aside with divine approval (cf., e.g., Jacob or Solomon). (CSB)

Regardless of the father's feelings for his wives, the firstborn is to be at no legal disadvantage in the inheritance.(TLSB)

21:17 *double portion.* In Israel the oldest son enjoyed a double share of the inheritance. Parallels to this practice come from Nuzi, Larsa in the Old Babylonian period, and Assyria in the Middle Assyrian period (see chart on "Ancient Texts Relating to the OT"). Receiving a double portion of an estate was also tantamount to succession. Thus Elisha succeeded Elijah (2Ki 2:9). (CSB)

Firstborn's share of inheritance was to be double according to ancient custom in Israel (cf Gn 27; 48:14). Nuzi documents (fifteenth century BC) have a similar ruling. (TLSB)

his strength. The first result of a man's procreative ability. (CSB)

God's first gift and blessing, who then has preferential treatment in the family and greater responsibility. Cf Ps 127–28. (TLSB)

21:15–17 The inheritance rights of the firstborn are safeguarded. God assures fair treatment and proper inheritance, which helps stabilize family life. Since He gives all things to us by grace, there is no basis for rivalry based on our merits. In Christ Jesus, we are assured of an inheritance imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for us! • Lord God, for Your undeserved goodness to us, we give You our thanks. You have made us to be partakers of the inheritance of Your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, Your only-begotten Son, the firstborn from the dead. Amen. (TLSB)

A Rebellious Son

18 "If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey the voice of his father or the voice of his **mother, and, though they discipline him, will not listen to them, 19 then his father and his mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his city at the gate of the place where he lives, 20 and they shall say to the elders of his city, 'This our son is stubborn and rebellious; he will not obey our voice; he is a glutton and a drunkard.'** **21 Then all the men of the city shall stone him to death with stones. So you shall purge the evil from your midst, and all Israel shall hear, and fear.**

21:18–21 Upholding parental authority was necessary for the stability of the family and community. The offense here is one so serious that it would threaten the stability and continuity of the covenant community. However, parents did not have the right to kill their children but had to bring them before the authorities, which protected children against capricious punishment by parents. (TLSB)

21:18 *stubborn and rebellious ... does not obey.* In wicked defiance of the fourth commandment. (CSB)

21:20 *glutton and a drunkard.* Examples of behaviors that could lead to this offense. (TLSB)

21:21 *You must purge the evil from among you.* Though there are no examples in the OT of this sentence being carried out, this law emphasized the seriousness of the offense. The intent of this law was not to rehabilitate but to cleanse the community and deter evil. (TLSB)

21:18–21 Persistent and utter rebellion against parental authority is covered by a law that demands capital punishment if there is no repentance. God demands that the integrity of the family be maintained by honoring fathers and mothers as His representatives to their children. To despise one's mother and father is to despise God Himself and threaten the well-being of the larger community. God is our heavenly

Father, who has given us a new birth to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, making us members of His household. • Keep me dear heavenly Father, from despising or angering my parents and other authorities. Lead me by Your grace to honor, serve, obey, love, and cherish them, through Jesus Christ, whose perfect obedience as a Son has won my forgiveness and salvation. Amen. (TLSB)

A Man Hanged on a Tree Is Cursed

22 “And if a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, 23 his body shall not remain all night on the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is cursed by God. You shall not defile your land that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance.

21:22–23 To deter crime, ancient Near Eastern cultures would often display the corpses of executed criminals by hanging or impaling them publicly as a visual statement that justice was upheld. (TLSB)

21:22 *put to death and ... hung on a tree.* The offender was first executed, then “hung on a tree” (see Ge 40:19), or, as the Hebrew for this phrase doubtless intends, “impaled on a pole.” (CSB)

21:23 *not remain all night on the tree overnight.* Prolonged exposure gives undue attention to the crime and the criminal. (CSB)

cursed by God. God had condemned murder, and hanging on a tree symbolized divine judgment and rejection. Christ accepted the full punishment of our sins, thus becoming “a curse for us” (Gal 3:13). (CSB)

The body was accursed on account of the capital crime. The NT uses this verse to describe Christ’s work for us! He became sin for us (2Co 5:21), was publicly hanged on a tree (1Pt 2:24), and was accursed and forsaken by God for it (Mt 27:46) Just: “[This curse] confirms our hope which depends on the crucified Christ, not because He who has been crucified is cursed by God, but because God foretold that which would be done by you all, and by those like to you, who do not know that this is He who existed before all, who is the eternal Priest of God, and King, and Christ” (ANF 1:247). (TLSB)

21:22–23 Executed criminals are not to be left hanging but must be buried the same day. They are cursed by God and will defile God’s gift, the land of promise, which God had hallowed. God gave Israel and us the gift of a Savior, His Son, who was hung on a tree to redeem us. He hallows us from the curse of the Law by becoming a curse for us. • Lord Jesus Christ, save us from the curse of our sin. Move us to fix our eyes on You as we persevere through this life until You at last grant us deliverance. In Your name we pray. Amen. (TLSB)