

### Cities of Refuge and the Importance of Multiple Witnesses

#### Deuteronomy 19

**Deuteronomy 19:1-13** - *“When the Lord your God has cut 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, <sup>2</sup> you shall separate three cities for yourself in the midst of your land which the Lord your God is giving you to possess. <sup>3</sup> You shall prepare roads for yourself, and divide into three parts the territory of your land which the Lord your God is giving you to inherit, that any manslayer may flee there.*

*<sup>4</sup> “And this is the case of the manslayer who flees there, that he may live: Whoever kills his neighbor unintentionally, not having hated him in time past— <sup>5</sup> as when a man goes to the woods with his neighbor to cut timber, and his hand swings a stroke with the ax to cut down the tree, and the head slips from the handle and strikes his neighbor so that he dies—he shall flee to one of these cities and live; <sup>6</sup> lest the avenger of blood, while his anger is hot, pursue the manslayer and overtake him, because the way is long, and kill him, though he was not deserving of death, since he had not hated the victim in time past.<sup>7</sup> Therefore I command you, saying, ‘You shall separate three cities for yourself.’*

*<sup>8</sup> “Now if the Lord your God enlarges your territory, as He swore to your fathers, and gives you the land which He promised to give to your fathers, <sup>9</sup> and if you keep all these commandments and do them, which I command you today, to love the Lord your God and to walk always in His ways, then you shall add three more cities for yourself besides these three, <sup>10</sup> lest innocent blood be shed in the midst of your land which the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, and thus guilt of bloodshed be upon you.*

*<sup>11</sup> “But if anyone hates his neighbor, lies in wait for him, rises against him and strikes him mortally, so that he dies, and he flees to one of these cities, <sup>12</sup> then the elders of his city shall send and bring him from there, and deliver him over to the hand of the avenger of blood, that he may die. <sup>13</sup> Your eye shall not pity him, but you shall put away the guilt of innocent blood from Israel, that it may go well with you.”*

#### Background Notes

Deuteronomy 18 reviewed four areas of requirement for Israel under the Law. Israel was to establish the Levites in their cities. Israel was to eliminate occult practices. Israel was to expect the Messiah. And Israel was to execute false prophets. The Laws that were reviewed in chapter 19 all have to do in some way with legal protection for the people. In verse 1, it's important to notice that the Lord emphasized - once again - that He was giving the territory of Canaan and its cities to the people of Israel (v1). If **God Himself** gave this Promised Land to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the Jewish people have a biblical claim to that Land. God never rescinded His promise of this Land to them. At the present time the Jewish people are temporarily not in the place of God's special blessing in the Land because they rejected their Messiah. However, according to Romans 11, they will be brought back into the place of blessing when, as a nation, they turn back and recognize their Messiah. **God never rescinded His gift of the Land to the Jewish people, and He never gave that Land to someone else!**

The end of verse 1 says that the children of Israel were to dispossess the inhabitants and dwell in their cities and in their houses. As a result, Israel did not destroy the cities and farms – they simply took them over. This fact is important in reference to the archaeological dating of the Conquest. Archaeologists should not expect to find a lot of destruction in the mounds or ruins at the time of the Conquest. According to the biblical record in the book of Joshua, Jericho, Ai, and Hazor were the only cities that were burned at the time of the Conquest.

## Doctrinal Points

### 1. The Cities of Refuge were given for manslaughter – not for murder.

The premeditated taking of life is murder. However, accidental death, where there is no intent to kill, is manslaughter. Under the Law, God provided “cities of refuge” for anyone involved in manslaughter. A typical case of manslaughter was given in verses 4-6: *“Whoever kills his neighbor unintentionally, not having hated him in time past—as when a man goes to the woods with his neighbor to cut timber, and his hand swings a stroke with the ax to cut down the tree, and the head slips from the handle and strikes his neighbor so that he dies—he shall flee to one of these cities and live, lest the avenger of blood, while his anger is hot, pursue the manslayer and overtake him, because the way is long, and kill him, though he was not deserving of death, since he had not hated the victim in time past.”*

The “avenger of blood” (v6) was the next of kin of the person who was killed. The next of kin had the responsibility to avenge the blood of his dead relative. This was considered to be a matter of justice. As long as the manslayer escaped to the city of refuge, he was safe until his case was decided. Hebrews 6:18 taught that the safety of the city of refuge pictures the refuge that a believer finds in Jesus Christ.

When the children of Israel possessed the Land, six cities of refuge were to be designated – three on the east and three on the west side of the Jordan River. They were to be strategically placed, with good roads, so that a manslayer could easily flee to the nearest city of refuge (v2-3). Only three cities of refuge were mentioned in Deuteronomy 19, because these were the three that were to be designated on the west side of the Jordan River. The three cities of refuge on the east side of the Jordan River were already designated (Deuteronomy 4).

Joshua 20:7 stated that the three cities on the west side of the Jordan River were *“Kedesh in Galilee in the mountains of Naphtali, Shechem in the mountains of Ephraim, and Kiriath Arba (which is Hebron) in the mountains of Judah.”* Three further cities of refuge were to be designated if Israel conquered and occupied all the land that the Lord had given them under the Abrahamic Covenant (Deuteronomy 19:9). However, Israel never occupied all this territory, and thus these additional cities of refuge never were designated.

The important point here was that the cities of refuge were **not for murderers** (v11-13). If it was determined that the killing was premeditated, not accidental, the murderer was not to be given the protection of the city of refuge. Rather, he was to be put to death for the wrongful taking of a life. The cities of refuge were given for manslaughter, not for murder.

## **2. The Law of Retribution was given as a limit – not as a license.**

**Deuteronomy 19:15-21** - *“One witness shall not rise against a man concerning any iniquity or any sin that he commits; by the mouth of two or three witnesses the matter shall be established. <sup>16</sup> If a false witness rises against any man to testify against him of wrongdoing, <sup>17</sup> then both men in the controversy shall stand before the Lord, before the priests and the judges who serve in those days. <sup>18</sup> And the judges shall make careful inquiry, and indeed, if the witness is a false witness, who has testified falsely against his brother, <sup>19</sup> then you shall do to him as he thought to have done to his brother; so you shall put away the evil from among you. <sup>20</sup> And those who remain shall hear and fear, and hereafter they shall not again commit such evil among you. <sup>21</sup> Your eye shall not pity: life shall be for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.”*

In Israel, a person was assumed innocent until proven guilty, and it took two or three witnesses to bring about a conviction. False witness could happen in that day just as it could happen today. If a witness were proven to be false, whatever penalty was intended for that crime was done to the false witness (v19). This law certainly kept false testimony to a minimum in Israel!

No pity was to be shown in carrying out justice (v21). It was to be “eye for eye, tooth for tooth, life for life.” This is known as the *Lex Talionis*, or the “Law of Retribution,” or “Law of Retaliation.” Unfortunately, down through the years many Jews used this law of retribution as a basis to retaliate in interpersonal relationships, or as a license to take revenge for what someone did to you. “If you slander me, I can slander you. If you ruin my property, I will ruin your property.”

But that was not why the Law of Retribution was given. It was actually given as a **limit** when meting out punishment for crime! For example: if, in an emotional moment or a heated argument, you punched your boss in the face and he lost a tooth or an eye, the courts could not punish you with the death penalty - no matter how much power and clout the boss had. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth meant that the punishment should not be excessive, but should fit the crime. And in the case of murder, that meant a life for a life.

In Matthew 5:38-39 the Lord Jesus said, *“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also.”* The Lord was not eliminating or changing the Law of Retribution - **He was correcting the improper use of this law**. As we mentioned, the Jewish people were using the Law of Retribution in a vindictive way, to justify revenge. This was wrong. The Lord taught that in interpersonal relationships, a person should not seek to take revenge, but rather to seek peace by “turning the other cheek.”

The Law of Retribution is still good as a limit in the area of social justice. The punishment should fit the crime. The Law of Retribution was given as a limit – not as license for revenge.

## Practical Application

### Watch out for stealing - little by little.

Verse 14: *“You shall not remove your neighbor’s landmark, which the men of old have set, in your inheritance which you will inherit in the land that the Lord your God is giving you to possess.”*

In the ancient world, property boundaries were generally marked out with stones. In most cases these landmark stones could be moved fairly easily. If they were moved little by little, over a length of time, a person could gradually gain some of his neighbor’s property without the neighbor being aware of it. This was **stealing**.

This law certainly has a lot of application for today because other things, besides property, can be stolen little by little. Because of jealousy, you can steal a person’s good reputation, little by little, by your negative comments. You can steal a person’s affections and break up a marriage - little by little. You can steal money (and other stuff) little by little, by not repaying a debt or by failing to something you’ve borrowed.

Watch out for stealing - little by little.