

## Deuteronomy 21:1-9 Cleansing the Land of a Murder Committed By An Unknown Person

Introduction: Chapter 19, 20, and through verse 9 in chapter 21 is dealing with the sixth commandment. The sixth commandment says, “Thou shalt not kill.”

But the question is: What if somebody has been murdered and the dead body is found, but it is not known who the murderer is? What then?

If it is known who the murderer is, there is no question about what to do. The law which God gave to Moses required that the murderer be put to death, Exodus 21:12.

Our text explains what to do if the murderer is not known. The matter is not to be left unattended.

- I. Who is responsible for officiating in the matter, v. 1-3.
  - A. If one is found murdered, the one who has found the body is responsible for reporting the matter to the authorities, v. 1.
    1. “The land” refers to a rural area.
    2. Therefore the officials of no particular city bear the responsibility at first for officiating in the matter.
  - B. Therefore the elders and judges of all the cities in the area are to meet and determine which city is closer to the spot where the murder victim was found, v. 2.
    1. The elders are the older men and represent the people at large of the whole area and of the whole nation.
    2. The judges are legal officials and represent the government — the law of the land.
  - C. The city nearest the crime would be responsible for handling the case, v. 3a.
    1. It is to be assumed that the kin of the victim would be responsible for the burial and so that is not the duty of the elders and judges.
    2. They are responsible for presenting an offering to the Lord to symbolically cleanse the land and the general population of guilt in the matter.
- II. What is to be done to cleanse the land from any guilt involving the murder, v. 3b.
  - A. The elders and judges of the city are to bring a young heifer which has never been used to work (such as pulling a plow or a wagon) to be offered to the Lord, v. 3b.
  - B. The heifer is to be carried to an uninhabited valley where she will be slain, v. 4. (Most scholars say that the Hebrew language carries the idea that the valley was to have a stream which never runs dry.)
  - C. The city officials were there to kill the heifer.
    1. The KJV says that they are to strike off the neck.
    2. The same Hebrew word is translated “to break the neck” in Exodus 13:13. (Most language scholars prefer that rendering best.)
  - D. Some priests are to be present as witnesses but do not officiate in any way, v. 5.
  - E. The elders are to wash their hands over the body of the heifer proclaiming that they neither committed the crime nor know who did, v. 6-7.
    1. This symbolizes the innocence of the people of the city, of the whole general area, and of the whole nation.
    2. If the officials later learn who the guilty party is, this ceremony will in no way hinder him from being charged, tried, and executed.

- F. The city officials offer a prayer to God asking that He not hold them nor the people of the land responsible for the murder of this victim, v. 8.
- G. God promises that He will answer that prayer. He will not hold the people responsible, v. 9.

III. Some observation to make.

- A. The sixth commandment forbids murder.
- B. Both the book of Genesis and the law of Moses require that the murderer be put to death, Genesis 9:6; Exodus 21:12.
- C. The sacrifice of the heifer did not provide forgiveness for the murder. (It was designed only to establish the innocence of those officials and their people who had no part in the crime and yet could not punish the guilty party because they did not know who he was) and it cautions against hatred. Watch your attitude.
- D. It serves as a reminder even to us that one should never be guilty of murder. (Human life is sacred. Because man was created in the image of God.)