

Deut 21 Put Away the Evil From Among You

This chapter pertains to five unique circumstances:

- I. .1-9 Finding a dead body in a field;
- II. .10-14 Taking a captive wife;
- III. .15-17 Dealing with inheritance issues;
- IV. .18-21 Dealing with a stubborn and rebellious son;
- V. .22-23 Hanging the dead body of a criminal on a tree

These are unique circumstances for which Moses provides guidelines or regulations for the Israelites to follow. Such things would happen occasionally in the PL, so Moses told the people what to do in such cases.

Obviously, we don't have to deal with these circumstances. We don't generally deal with dead bodies; we don't take wives from captivity; we are not obligated to give our firstborn sons a double portion of the inheritance; we don't stone rebellious children to death; we don't hang criminals' bodies on trees.

It's an important rule of Bible interpretation that we must consider who the original audience was for these regulations. This was meant for the nation of Israel living in the PL. These are the kinds of circumstances that they might encounter.

Do these five situations have anything in common? I believe that the common theme within each of these situations is the necessity of putting away evil from Israel. In each case, the potential for evil is great. So in each case, Israel must choose to put away evil and do what is right in God's sight.

Cf. vs. 9 and vs. 21b. These regulations help Israel put away evil and do what is right in the sight of the Lord.

All of us should be interested in reducing the evil in our lives and in doing what is right in God's sight. Each one of these cases shows how to put away evil and do right. These verses contain some timeless principles that we can apply in our lives on a practical level.

- I. .1-9 Do what is right regarding human life. Put away the evil of innocent blood.
 - A. .1 Someone finds a corpse in a field, and no one knows who killed him. The assumption here is that a murder occurred, and the murderer was not found. It's an unsolved murder.

Normally, the people of the area would find the murderer and execute him. But in this case, they can't find who committed the murder; the criminal got away with the crime. If the criminal is not punished, then justice is not done.

The shedding of innocent blood defiles the land, so they had to do something about this.

- B. .2-3a The elders from the nearest city to where the dead body was found have to deal with this situation.

They would assume that the murderer must have lived nearby, so the elders from the nearest town have to take action.

What this whole procedure assumes is that the guilt of innocent blood would be upon them and the land if they did nothing about this. God's wrath would fall upon them if they failed to deal with this appropriately.

- C. .3b-4 They take a heifer that has not worked, bring it to a river in a uncultivated valley, and break the heifer's neck; i.e., they kill it.

Killing the heifer shows that the criminal deserved capital punishment. The people of that area cannot find the criminal, so someone has to die in his place for justice to be done.

Quote: The fact that the animal and field had never been worked suggests that they were undefiled, never having been ritually contaminated by humans.¹

So this is substitutionary atonement—the life of an innocent victim is taken in place of the guilty criminal.

You'll note that the men kill the heifer but do not shed its blood. This is not part of the standard sacrificial system; this is not a regular sin offering. It's an atonement for justice. The animal died in place of the unknown criminal, who deserved to die.

- D. .5-6 The priests and the elders of the city wash their hands over the heifer and declare that they did not shed innocent blood; they don't know who did it. They are not responsible. The washing of their hands symbolized that they were innocent of this murder.

¹ Eugene H. Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, vol. 4, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 288.

- E. .8-9 They pray that the Lord would provide atonement and not lay the guilt of innocent blood upon the people. That's how to put away evil and to do what is right in God's sight. This procedure purged the guilt of innocent blood from the land, and it was "right in the sight of the Lord." This clears up the matter and settles it.

App: The murderer deserved capital punishment, but they could not find the murderer. So someone else—a substitute—dies in the place of the murderer.

Capital punishment is biblical. It is right and proper for murderers to lose their lives. They have shed innocent blood, and that forfeits their own lives.

We find a similar situation at the end of the chapter...

- F. **Skip to vss. 22-23** – This section deals with another dead body—someone who had been the subject of capital punishment. In that case, the dead body of a criminal should be hung on a tree.

This is not crucifixion—that form of torture was not even invented at this point in history. The criminal is already dead when his body hanged on a tree. But he should not stay there overnight. He should be buried the day that he's killed. A person hanging like that is "accursed of God." But leaving him exposed would "defile the land," so the criminal must be buried.

Why would they hang a dead body on a tree? Probably as a warning about what happens to criminals. Public executions were normal in those days. Hanging up a dead criminal would remind people about the serious consequences of crime. To expose a dead body would be to hold the criminal up to public shame and ridicule. That would be a great curse to the dead person as well as a strong deterrence to others.

We see several important principles here:

First, we see that human life is valuable and precious. Those who take human life deserve to die. The life of the unknown corpse found in a field had to be atoned for through the substitution of the heifer. Even the guilty criminal had to be buried. Failure to bury a dead body would defile the land. Human bodies are important, both in life and in death. Valuing human life is right in God's sight.

It also shows that God has wrath against sin. The danger here is that God's wrath would fall on the people if they ignored the shedding of innocent blood. The atonement of the heifer effectively turned aside God's wrath. Hanging a criminal's body on a tree demonstrated God's wrath against sin. So we see both God's goodness (atonement) and wrath (death of the heifer, hanging up the criminal's body).

Third, these cases show that God is gracious. He provided a way to remove the guilt of innocent blood from the community. That process involves substitutionary atonement. God is satisfied by the death of the animal. The murderer should die, but instead, the animal dies. God removes the pollution of sin through an adequate sacrifice.

If we want to put away evil and do right, we must value human life and avail ourselves of God's gracious offer of atonement.

Ultimately, atonement for sin – payment for sin – comes through Christ. ...

II. .10-14 Do what is right regarding family matters.

We have three cases here that involve family life, particularly focusing on wives and children. And we see some things that are tolerated but not really ideal.

- A. The first case pertains to a soldier taking a captive wife from among their defeated enemies. This would *not* pertain to the Canaanites, but to enemies living elsewhere.

Deuteronomy 7:3 Nor shall you make marriages with [the Canaanites]. You shall not give your daughter to their son, nor take their daughter for your son.

- 1. Taking captives in warfare was very common in the ancient world. Virtually all nations took captives from their enemies when they were at war. Wars in that region were very common, and everyone knew what happened when a city was conquered. Many people were displaced and severed from their normal relationships because of war.

- a) It was common for captives to be taken as slaves or sold into slavery.
- b) It was common for captives to be killed.

Those were your two options if your city was conquered. Neither option was very pleasant.

2. We see here that Israelite soldiers could marry captives if they so desired. Again, this might seem rather unkind to us, but in that era, these regulations protected captives. A captive wife actually had better conditions than most other captives. This practice protected women captives and limited what soldiers could do to them.

Soldiers generally treated captive women very badly. These rules prevented Israelite men from abusing women, and it allowed captive women some time to adjust to their new conditions. So it was a more humane way of dealing with the results of warfare.

If an Israelite man found a woman he wanted, he could not simply have his way with her. He had to marry her.

3. .12-13 The Israelite man could take his captive into his house, have her shave her hair and trim her nails, change her clothes, and let her mourn her family for a month. These regulations prevented an Israelite soldier from simply grabbing a captive woman and making her his wife. The process would take at least a month. So the man had plenty of time to think this over.

After capturing this woman, the man had to treat her with civility and dignity. The captive woman probably did not enjoy it, but it was better than the alternative—immediate death or being sold as a slave.

And since she is mourning her parents, it seems likely that they were dead, probably killed in the battle. She likely had no home to return to, possibly no family connections remaining.

Shaving her head, trimming her nails, and changing her clothes were meant to show that she was beginning a new life. She should make a definite break from her former life and get ready for a new situation.

So the Israelite soldiers could take a woman captive, but they could not abuse her in the various ways that many soldiers would. The soldiers are restricted from dishonoring these women after they became captives.

4. After a month's delay, the man takes her as his wife. The woman, in this case, didn't have any options. It does not say here that the captive woman agreed to any of this. Women at that time were often treated more like property than like individuals with rights. Marriages were often arranged, so the woman would not normally have any other options.
5. .14 Given all the factors involved here, you can imagine that this relationship might not work out very well. The woman is taken captive against her will and forced into marriage, she might resent that and make life unpleasant for the man who enslaved her. Just because she was attractive (.11) does not mean that she would be a good wife.

App: That is a timeless principle. Just because a woman is beautiful, it does not mean that she would be a good wife. Although men appreciate external beauty, it does not have much to do with being a good wife. E.g. Samson.

6. .14b If the woman proves to be displeasing to the man, he has to set her free.
 - a) Perhaps the woman turned out to have some real problems. Maybe she refused to adopt Jewish values or lifestyle. The man decides he does not want her.
 - b) The man cannot "treat her brutally" because he's "humbled her." In this case, she would go out as a free woman. The marriage would be terminated; i.e., they would get a divorce. She would not be a slave, and she could marry someone else.

This is certainly not an endorsement of divorce. In the OT, divorce is sometimes allowed or tolerated, but divorce is never ideal.

Again we see how God values human life, even the life and needs of a conquered captive. Vulnerable people have rights and deserve to be treated honorably.

- B. .15-17 The second case pertains to dealing with inheritance issues.

1. Moses refers to polygamy—having more than one wife. This situation was legal under the OT system, although it was not ideal. Having more than one wife brings many complications into life. We don't find many examples in the Bible of polygamy working out very well.

Quote: Polygamy, though practiced by some, never appears in a positive light in the Old Testament; the Bible never describes a truly happy polygamous marriage.²

2. .15 You can see the situation here: a man has two wives, one loved and one unloved. That's one of the problems associated with polygamy—favoritism. It would be natural for a man to appreciate one wife over another. Polygamy usually creates issues of favoritism, envy, and discrimination.
3. The firstborn son is born to the unloved wife. In that case, the man is obligated to acknowledge the firstborn son as the rightful heir; he cannot give that status to a son born of his more favored wife.

Quote: a husband's attitude toward his wife cannot affect his legal responsibilities to her and her children.³

4. The concept of "firstborn" pertains to both *time* of birth and *status* within the family. Note vs. 16—the man cannot "bestow firstborn status" on a son other than the true firstborn.
5. .17 The firstborn son was the rightful heir of a "double portion" of the man's property. That inheritance had to be designated for the true firstborn son.

App: The first thing that we learn from this is to avoid polygamy. Of course, polygamy is illegal, so it's not too hard to avoid.

The other issue here is fairness or impartiality. The man has to be fair to his heirs. The firstborn son deserves the double portion, so he must receive it. The father cannot act with favoritism; he has to be fair.

² Jack S. Deere, "Deuteronomy," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 301.

³ Eugene H. Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, vol. 4, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 292.

Of course, we are not under that obligation today. Parents can designate anyone they want as heir or not. There is no NT requirement that fathers follow this pattern for the double portion.

But this pattern *does* seem to imply that fathers should aim to leave an inheritance for his children. Cf. the bumper sticker—“We are spending our children’s inheritance.” Christian people ought to strive to leave something for their children. We should believe in generational wealth.

Even today, inheritance issues can be the source of great family conflict. If parents are planning to leave an inheritance to their children, they should be very careful and intentional in how they make those arrangements. I.e., make a will.

C. A third case has to do with a stubborn and rebellious son. .18-21

1. The fifth commandment obligates children to honor their parents (Deut 5:16).
2. What Moses describes here is persistent and unrepentant rebellion of a young man against his parents. The stubborn son does not listen to his parents, and he does not respond to chastisement.

Moses is not talking about young children here; the sons in view are young adults. Perhaps they still lived at home, so they were still dependent on their parents. They are still under the supervision of their parents. So young adults living at home are likely in view. And we all know how rebellious kids of that age group can be—especially boys.

3. .19 The parents bring their rebellious son to the elders of the city and bring charges against him.
 - a) He’s stubborn and rebellious. I.e., disrespectful to parents
 - b) He will not obey the commands of the parents.
 - c) He’s a glutton and a drunkard. I.e., self-indulgent and good for nothing

In other words, the guy is a confirmed and committed evil person. The OT called people like that a “son of Belial.” He was dishonoring his parents by this kind of depraved behavior.

App: Parents should take open rebellion by their children very seriously. Do not put up with disrespect.

4. .21 The elders of the city hear the evidence, pronounce a verdict, and carry out the punishment.
- a) The assumption here is that the elders of the city are convinced that the charges are true and they go ahead with the execution.
 - b) Note that “all the men of the city” stone the rebel. That might even include the rebel’s father.
 - c) .21b Doing so puts away evil. Moses insists that Israel must act to put away evil from among them.
 - d) .21end Doing so deters evil behavior in others.
 - e) This might seem like very severe punishment, but rebellion against parents amounts rebellion against God. Those who rebel against both parents and God would likely rebel against all forms of authority. They would likely bring trouble to the nation. So capital punishment is required to put away the evil from the nation.
Quote: The son was ultimately rebelling against the Lord’s authority and therefore attacking the foundations of the covenant community. The legislation here was not cruel nor did it give parents a right to abuse their children.⁴
 - f) And we might note that there is no evidence in the Bible that such a punishment was ever carried out. But this rule probably deterred some potential rebels from going too far. If a rebellious son knew that this potential existed, it might influence him to settle down a bit.

Moses’ intent is that these rules would both put away evil and do what is right in the sight of God. We ought to have the same desire today—we want to purge our lives from evil, and we want to do what is right in God’s sight.

We must do what is right by having a high regard for human life. God values human life, and even dead human bodies deserve humane treatment.

⁴ Jack S. Deere, “Deuteronomy,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 301.

We must do what is right regarding family matters. We should carefully follow biblical principles pertaining to wives and children. We should be fair with our heirs. Sometimes we have to be rather stern with rebellious children. We should see that family matters are very serious.

We ought to show compassion for the outsider and the vulnerable. We cannot treat people brutally or unfairly. We have to show kindness and compassion, especially to the weak. We should be fair to all and not show favoritism. Think about how to apply these principles to your own relationships.

The best way to purge evil and to do right is to follow God's commands. Our conditions and situations today are far different from those pertaining in ancient Israel. But we can still demonstrate a high regard for human life, for our families, and for outsiders. We can still show compassion and be fair in how we treat people. Our aim should be the same—put away the evil and do what is right in the sight of the Lord.