

## The Case of the Unknown Killer

**INTRODUCTION:** Many passages in Scripture underscore how special human life is to God and how high is the cost of every human life lost. At the creation of man, we have the statement that mankind is made “in the image of God” (Genesis 1:26-27). After the first murder, God said that the blood of slain Abel cried out to Him from the ground (4:10). In Gen. 6:11-13, God decreed “the end of all flesh” because there was so much unrestrained violence on earth. After the flood, He instituted capital punishment for murder because human beings are created in God’s image (Gen. 9:5-6).

God recognizes the lesser offense of manslaughter. In Numbers 35:9-34, Deuteronomy 19:1-13, and Joshua 20, God told Israel to create cities of refuge for the protection of those involved in accidental deaths. He wanted the victim’s life to be acknowledged, but did not want vengeance to run rampant. He only wanted those guilty of murder to lose their lives.

In these passages He spelled out the difference between murder and manslaughter. A killer would be charged with murder if he used a weapon against his victim, was known to hate the victim, struck the victim in enmity, or laid in wait for the victim. If the victim was a friend and the killing unintentional, the charge could be manslaughter.

It’s important to note at the start of this lesson that forgiveness for the sin of murder is possible in Christ. The lesson will focus on Deuteronomy 21:1-9, which poses an interesting question for Israel’s judicial system: What should be done when the person responsible for a violent death was unknown?

### OBSERVATION

1. Read Deuteronomy 21:1-9 aloud
2. Discuss the context:
  - Where is this passage placed in the canon of Scripture – history, law, prophets? (*Law*)
  - When – at what point in Israel’s history were these instructions given? (*Shortly before Israel was to enter the Promised Land*)
  - Who is speaking? (*Moses*)

3. What problem does the passage address?
  - *A dead human body is found*
  - *It's apparent the person was slain, but not known by whom*
  - *It's a murder mystery. Whodunit?!?*
4. What is the job of priests and Levites? (verse 5)
  - *To serve the Lord*
  - *To bless the people in His name*
  - *To resolve disputes and assault cases*
5. What were the people supposed to do in order to solve the problem?
  - *Report the finding to elders and judges*
  - *Measure the distance from the body to the nearest city*
  - *Appoint that city to perform a ceremony*
6. Describe the ceremony
  - *The elders of the nearest city invite priests and Levites to observe*
  - *They take a heifer into a valley where there is running water (a stream or river)*
  - *They break the heifer's neck*
  - *They wash their hands in the water over the neck of the heifer*
  - *They swear an oath of innocence and ask God for forgiveness*
7. What promise is made in verse 8 to the people performing this ceremony? (*atonement/forgiveness for the bloodshed would be granted them*)

## **INTERPRETATION**

1. According to verse 9, why was it important for this ceremony to be performed?
  - *To do what is right in God's eyes*
  - *To put away the guilt of innocent blood*
2. Consider this passage in light of Matthew 27:24-25, where Pilate washed his hands of Christ's crucifixion and the people said, "His blood shall be on us and on our children!" Discuss the significance of hand-washing.
3. Why should people ask forgiveness for a crime they didn't commit? What was the consequence of unexamined or unavenged murder according to Numbers 35:33-34?
  - *Murder pollutes (defiles) the land*
  - *The only thing that can clean the stain is the death of the murderer*

4. Have someone read Genesis 9:5-6. What is the importance of human lifeblood to God? According to Gen. 9:3-4, is there a similar consequence when an animal is killed? Why or why not?
  - *Mankind (male and female) are made in God's image*
  - *God demands a reckoning (accounting) for every person who is slain*
  - *Blood is associated with the life of a man or animal*
  - *Animals may be killed and eaten for food*
  - *Animals should be killed when they kill a human being*
  - *Murderers must be killed*
  
5. Discussion: Are the instructions of Deuteronomy 21 for us today? Why or why not?

## **APPLICATION**

1. What principles are there from Deuteronomy 21 for us and our judicial system to follow? What should happen when a person is murdered?
  
2. What comfort can be derived from Deut. 21 and related passages?
  - *There is a cost for the loss of life – a valuable animal is slain.*
  - *There is recognition of the victim's life. His life counts for something.*
  - *God is concerned about righting wrongs.*
  - *God provided Israel with a means for ridding the land of bloodguiltiness.*
  - *God provides atonement/forgiveness.*
  
3. Look at Isaiah 26:21. Get personal: Does this promise provide comfort or conviction for you? (*let participants silently contemplate their responses*)
  
4. In the Old Testament, the punishment for murder was death. What should people do who are guilty of murder today? Think about your answer in light of 1 John 3:10-15 and Rev 22:14-15. Can a murderer be saved?
  - *Saul was guilty of approving the murder of Christians before God miraculously saved him (Acts 9:1, Romans 1:29-32).*
  - *David repented of killing Uriah and received forgiveness (2 Samuel 12:13; see also Psalm 32:5 and 51:14).*
  - *According to Revelation 9:20-21, failure to repent of murder and other sins shows the stubbornness of man.*
  
5. How is murder forgiven? (*the blood of Jesus*)
  - *1 John 1:7-9 – Cleanses us from all sin; note that in Rev. 22:14, people who wash their robes/do His commandments may enter the city. The key is confession of sin/repentance.*
  - *The sacrifice on the Day of Atonement cleansed Israel from all sin (Leviticus 16:30). According to Hebrews 9:22 and Ephesians 5:2, Christ sacrificed Himself for our sin.*

- *Isaiah 53:12 speaks of Christ bearing the sins of many. Among other transgressions, He took the punishment for murder on Himself when He died on the cross.*

6. Have the class suggest other relevant passages on sin, repentance, and forgiveness.

**SUMMARY:** In cases of unsolved murder, the city nearest the spot where the body was found assumed responsibility. In order to purge the land of bloodguilt, the townspeople performed a hand-washing ceremony and appealed to God for forgiveness. God is gracious to recognize the value of the dead person and to give us a means of finding forgiveness. He shows that society should not allow any human death to go unexamined or unmourned.

**CLOSING:** Spend time in prayer and thanksgiving – contemplating how the murder of the innocent God-Man paid the penalty for all our sin, and how His resurrection means we live eternally.

**OVERTIME:** Watch the *'Brother's Keeper'* video (5:23 minutes, available in HD on the 2016 Slideshow DVD from Life Matters Worldwide [<http://store.lifemattersww.org/slideshow-dvd>], or watch online [<https://vimeo.com/140183946>]).