

**“Unsolved Murders, Part 1: The Value of Human Life”**

**Deuteronomy 21:1-9**

**October 12, 2025**

**Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service**

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**The Reading of the Word**

We continue this morning in the Book of Deuteronomy, as Moses instructs God’s people about how they are to live in the land.

Today we come to a passage in which God instructs Israel on what they should do when a murder remains unsolved, and likely is unsolvable.

With that in mind, let’s turn now to our text: Deuteronomy 21:1-9.

Please do listen carefully, for this is God’s Word for us this morning.

Moses said to the people:

<sup>21:1</sup> “If in the land that Yahweh your God is giving you to possess someone is found slain, lying in the open country, and it is not known who killed him, <sup>2</sup> then your elders and your judges shall come out, and they shall measure the distance to the surrounding cities. <sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> Then the priests, the sons of Levi, shall come forward, for Yahweh your God has chosen them to minister to him and to bless in the name of Yahweh, and by their word every dispute and every assault shall be settled. <sup>6</sup> 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, <sup>7</sup> and they shall testify, ‘Our hands did not shed this blood, nor did our eyes see it shed. <sup>8</sup> Accept atonement, O Yahweh, 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.’ <sup>9</sup> So you shall purge the guilt of innocent blood from your midst, when you do what is right in the sight of Yahweh.

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

## **Prayer of Illumination**

Lord,  
we ask you to work now through this, your Word to us, your servants,  
the very word in which you have helped us to place our hope.  
For our comfort in the afflictions we face in this world  
is that your promises in your Word give us life.  
Though the world may deride us,  
we do not turn from this, your revelation to us.  
Teach us from it now, we ask, in Jesus's name. Amen.  
[Based on Psalm 119:49-51]

## **Introduction**

We have in our text this morning a situation: a person is found slain in the land of God's people – in the open country. After an investigation, the murderer or manslayer remains unknown. The case is unsolved. It appears to be unsolvable.

And it's at that point that God calls on his people to carry out the ritual we have described here.

And though the ritual may at first seem strange to us, the core message that comes through it is actually pretty clear.

And what we see in this ritual is the sacred value of human life, and the corporate responsibility we have for our neighbors, both of which should lead us to repentance and faith.

So there are two core concepts at the heart of this ritual: the sacred value of human life and the corporate (or community) responsibility we have for our neighbors.

Those are two pretty big ideas. And so we'll break them up over two Sundays. This morning we'll focus on what this text teaches us about the value of human life. And then next week we'll focus on the Bible's teaching about corporate (or community) responsibility for our neighbors.

So, our focus this morning is that one thing we see in this ritual is the sacred value of human life, which should lead us to repentance and faith.

Let's break that down together.

## **What We See in This Ritual Is the Sacred Value of Human Life**

First, what we see in this ritual is the sacred value of human life.

This ritual, when compared to others in the Old Testament, has a number of unusual elements. It's an odd ritual, even from within the worldview of the Old Testament itself. [Meyers, *Theopolis*, 37:40-38:40]

We're not going to sort out every mystery of this text. But we can understand quite a bit of it. So let's try to do that by going through it now, one step at a time.

We start with verse one: "If in the land that Yahweh your God is giving you to possess someone is found slain, lying in the open country, and it is not known who killed him."

Back in chapter 19 Deuteronomy dealt with situations where someone was killed, and the killer was known. Now, here at the beginning of chapter 21, Moses speaks about situations where someone has been killed – whether by an intentional murder, or an unintentional act of manslaughter – and the killer is unknown. A body is found, an investigation is carried out, but there are no witnesses, and the evidence leads to no conviction, and maybe even no suspects. [Brown, 230; Craigie, 278; Wright, 232]

The judicial process has come to a dead end.

And yet, even after investigators have done their due diligence, there are moral and spiritual concerns that remain for God's people.

So let's continue on, in verse two: "then your elders and your judges shall come out."

These were the chiefs of the city – the key leaders. The elders were the civic leaders, and the judges were judicial leaders. We'll also read in verse five that the priests – the spiritual leaders – were to come out and to be involved with this as well. These are the people responding to the situation. These were important people. [Wright, 232]

Continuing in verse two: "then your elders and your judges shall come out, and they shall measure the distance to the surrounding cities. And the elders of the city that is nearest to the slain man shall take a heifer"

So, the leaders and judicial authorities – the elders and judges – from several cities were to come out and measure the distance from the place this unjust death had occurred to each of the nearby cities and figure out which city was closest. And then the leaders of the geographically closest city – they would be responsible for the ritual that would follow. [Craigie, 279]

So ... notice ... it was not the town who knew the murdered victim best who carried out this ritual. It was not those related to him. It was simply those geographically closest to where the death had occurred. [Brown, 204; Contra Bejon, *Theopolis*, 1400ff]

And so, this ritual was not primarily about helping people process their grief – as important as that may be – because the people of the city performing this ritual may not have been close to this murder victim. In fact, the people of the city performing this ritual may not have even known the victim.

And actually, the person this ritual was performed for – the person who died – may not have even been an Israelite. He or she may have been a foreigner – a sojourner, an immigrant. Or they may have been someone who was poor and unknown. Or they may have been someone who was known but who was disreputable. My point is there are no qualifications for who this ritual was to be performed for. It just says that it's for when "someone" is found slain. Someone. Anyone. Any human being. The people of the city – actually the top leaders of the city – were obligated to stop everything, pause their lives, and perform this ritual, possibly for someone they didn't even know, possibly for someone they didn't even like, possibly for someone they even considered an outsider.

That tells us that this ritual was not about something subjective or personal. It wasn't primarily therapeutic. This ritual was about the objective value that God places on the life of another human being ... regardless of their background, regardless of their circumstances, regardless of the details of their life. And in this ritual God calls on his people to place that same objective value on every human life, just as he does.

Let's continue on from verse three: "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. 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."

Now ... what's going on here?

To begin, this is not actually a sacrifice – at least it doesn't fit into any of the sacrifices specified for Israel in the Old Testament, because no blood is shed [Craigie, 279] and no fire is involved. The animal's neck was simply broken, we're told in verse four.

And so, as we consider the details, three plausible explanations emerge for this ritual.

The first is that this rite "represents a vicarious execution of the unknown criminal." The heifer is a "symbolic substitute for the murderer." And the killing of the heifer is a symbolic execution.

In some ways this makes sense. The unusual mode of the killing, based on striking the animal, is a little bit like a stoning, along with the fact that this is carried out by the elders rather than the priests. All that fits with the idea of this being a symbolic execution of the criminal. [Wright, 232-233]

But, interestingly, the emphasis in the following verse is not on atonement for the criminal but for the people.

This leads to a second possible explanation, which is similar to the first, in that it sees the ritual as a symbolic execution, but different from the first, because it sees the heifer not representing the criminal, but representing the city. After all, it's the city – the community – that's asking for atonement. And, as one theologian points out, it may be significant that the heifer was a female sacrifice, and cities in Israel were spoken of as feminine. [Leithart, *Theopolis*, 44:50ff]

The first and second explanations both assume that what we have here is a vicarious execution – either of the unknown murderer, or of the guilt-bearing city that may have produced the unknown murderer.

But ... what doesn't fit with the idea of an execution is the location. Why would this happen out in the open country, when executions were often done in a more public space, like the city gate? [Wright, 232-233]

Well, that leads us to a third explanation, which is that this ritual is actually meant to be a reenactment of the murder, followed by a washing ritual of cleansing. This would explain the location – out in an uninhabited place ... a place just like where the murder had taken place. The elders reenact the murder, and then symbolically wash their hands, allowing the water to carry the guilt of the deed away from them. [Block, 490; Wright, 233]

So ... there are three possible explanations.

And some of you might think this is cheating ... but I don't really feel obligated to choose. Rituals often have layered meanings. And I'm comfortable with the possibility that all three of these meanings are at work in some way the same ritual: that the representatives of the city are being forced to face a reenactment of this murder that happened in their territory ... that they are also being called on to act, even if it was just symbolically, to bring justice to the perpetrator through a vicarious execution of the criminal ... and that they were, also on some level, accepting responsibility for what had happened in their territory, and on their watch, by carrying out a sentence symbolically on themselves. I think all of those things could be going on in this ritual.

But whether there's just one of those things at work, or all three of them ... there are deep themes that each of these interpretations share.

Christopher Wright puts it like this. He writes: "It is often when the [Old testament] seems most culturally remote from us that we need to pay closest attention to its challenges. What ought to strike us from this law is not the oddity of a cow with a broken neck in an uninhabited wadi, but the expected response of a whole community through its civic, judicial, and religious leaders to *a single human death*." [Wright, 233]

What's striking is the great value this ritual places on one human life.

The Bible teaches that all human beings bear God's image. We were made in the image of God [Genesis 1:27], and even after our rebellion, even after we had been marred by sin, we still retain the image of God [James 3:9] And it's the image of God that is the basis of how seriously the Bible takes any crime against a human life. [Genesis 9:6]

Every human life has a sacred value. That truth is at the heart of this passage. It's why this ritual must be done by God's people for any such wrongful human death, regardless of the people's relationship to them. It's one of the reasons why the most important people of the city are called on to attend to this ritual. Human life has a sacred value, because *every* human being bears the

image of God. And so God calls us to treat each human life with respect and dignity, and to acknowledge that any wrongful human death is a tragedy. That's what's at work in this ritual.

And so, in the verses that remain, the leaders of the city wash their hands over the heifer, they testify to their inability to identify the murderer, and they plead with God to atone for the guilt of what has happened, so that that guilt would not be set against them, or the city, or Israel as a nation.

And in this too, we see the weight given to a single wrongful human death. Moses knows that God cares so much for a single human life, wrongfully taken, that it will evoke God's wrath – his just anger – unless they seek atonement for this unjust tragedy before God. [Craigie, 280]

That's how serious the wrongful death of a single human being is in God's sight. That's how serious God wanted his people to take the wrongful death of a single human being.

Taken together, what we see in this ritual is the sacred value of human life.

### **This Should Lead Us to Repentance**

And seeing that should lead to a few things.

In light of this text, we should look at ourselves and how we relate to the people around us ... and then, from that, we should repent.

What we see in this ritual, is the sacred value of human life, which should lead us to repentance towards our neighbors.

Let's go back to that Christopher Wright quote from before ... but let's read a little further.

He says: "What ought to strike us from this law is not the oddity of a cow with a broken neck in an uninhabited wadi, but the expected response of a whole community through its civic, judicial, and religious leaders to *a single human death*. In *our* society, a violent death has to be particularly gruesome or shocking [...] to become even newsworthy, let alone a matter for public penitence. We have lost not only any concept of corporate responsibility for blood guilt" – we'll say more about that next week – "but," Wright continues, "we have increasingly lost any sense of the sanctity of life itself. [...] Shedding innocent blood has become a fact of life, silently sanitized by statistics." [Wright, 233]

As the old saying goes: "one death is a tragedy; a million deaths is a statistic."

As we've said, this ritual, among other things, called on God's people to grapple with the weight and the tragedy of even a single unnecessary human death. Regular life stopped. The most important people of the city attended to what had happened. And they acknowledged before God the weight of it all.

But often ... for us, today ... an untimely death isn't weighty. It's just another statistic. We don't stop life for such things. At most we scroll on our phones, we see a headline, we shake our heads, and we move on. There's little sense of the gravity of what has happened.

And many unnecessary and tragic deaths in our world get even less attention – they make no headlines at all in our culture.

For example, by one estimate, between 3.1 and 3.5 million children die each year as a result of undernutrition – as a result of hunger. [<https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/10/1048452>, <https://www.economist.com/international/2008/01/24/the-starvelings>, [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(07\)61869-8/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(07)61869-8/fulltext)]. Some estimates put that number much higher than that [<https://www.weforum.org/stories/2019/07/820-million-starving-people-number-growing/>]. But even if we go with the lower estimate of 3.1 million ... that means that a child dies of malnutrition every 10 seconds.

And it's entirely preventable. The world produces enough food to feed every human being alive. [<https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/10/1048452>] But there's not enough will to get it where it's most needed.

Now, put aside for a moment your questions of who's really responsible to feed those children – we'll come back to that next week.

For now, what I want to ask you – what I want to ask each of us this morning, including myself, is do we really care about – do we really feel the gravity of – the child in sub-Saharan Africa, the child in South America, and the child in Gaza, each of whom is starving, and all three of whom have died in the time it took me to say this sentence?

Do we really feel the gravity of that?

In Deuteronomy, the unnecessary death of one human being was a tragedy, which called on the most important people of the city to put their lives on hold, and to carry out this ritual, and to call on God for mercy. For us, the unnecessary death of 3.1 million children is just a statistic, and barely elicits a sigh.

But maybe the numbers are just too big, and the people just too far away.

Let's try something a little closer to home. In Pierce County, at least 128 people experiencing homelessness have died so far this year. [I say "at least" because these stats are only for those who came under the jurisdiction of the medical examiner.] Only 15 of those were natural deaths. 113 of them were unnatural ... and therefore unnecessary. Almost half of those who died were under 45 years old. Most who died were here in Tacoma. In fact, setting the rest of Pierce County aside, in Tacoma alone, a homeless person dies of unnatural causes every 3 days. Because they don't get the help that they need. [<https://www.piercecountywa.gov/8603/Statistics-and-Data>]

Now once again, set aside the questions of who is responsible – save those for next week.

All I want to ask right now is: Do we care?

When we see the homeless – when we interact with them – do we see them as men and women who bear God’s image, men and women who have dignity as God’s beloved sons and daughters, men and women whose suffering – whatever the cause – is a heartbreaking tragedy – do we see them as having sacred value ... or do we too often instead see them as a nuisance ... an annoyance ... a blight?

God told his people in Deuteronomy that even when a sojourner, or a pauper, who none of them knew, died unnecessarily – died by violence – out in the nearby countryside – even then regular life should stop, and the most important people in the community should step forward, and do something that would truly acknowledge the tragedy that had occurred.

Do we see our homeless neighbors as worthy of the same dignity? Because the Bible says that they are.

And this concept extends in other directions as well. The clerk we speak to at the store, the coworker who annoys us, the fellow church member who bores us, the child who pesters us, the customer service rep who answers our call, the awkward neighbor, the person in the checkout line who clearly has mental health struggles, the driver in front of us who’s going to slow – each of these people bears God’s image. Each of them has sacred value. Do we see them that way? Do we treat them that way?

Because to whatever extent we don’t – in whatever instances we don’t – our text this morning calls us to repent. It calls us to see the sacred value of every human being the Lord has placed on his planet.

Where do you need to repent in that way?

What we see in this ritual is the sacred value of human life, which should lead us to repentance towards our neighbors.

### **This Should Lead Us to Faith**

Finally, this ritual and this text should also lead us to faith towards God.

This text calls us to be a different kind of people – it calls us to turn from our coldness and callousness towards human life, and to see the dignity and value of those around us and around the world who bear God’s image. And that challenge is a good thing, which we should take to heart.

But as we reflect on that calling ... we also see our guilt. We see our failures. We see the ways that we have been calloused to the people God has placed all around us ... indifferent to God’s call to love our neighbor ... unmoved by the image of God in the people we see.

And in our coldness, we see our guilt. And that can leave us discouraged. That can leave us feeling like we bear a heavy burden.

Thankfully, our text this morning also tells us what to do with such guilt.

Let's start with the water.

Water shows up twice here. First, the elders – serving as the people's representatives – all the elders were to wash their hands, in verse six.

But then, second, along with that, water also comes up in verse four. We're told there that this ritual washing had to take place in a valley with running water.

And it's in this valley with running water that they were to wash their hands. And while verse six says that they were to wash their hands over the heifer, I think there's an implication that this washing would also take place right at, or very close by, that running water.

Commentator Christopher Wright sees here a reference to an idea that would come up much later in the Bible – in the Book of Micah. There, in a text we often hear in our declaration of pardon, the prophet assures us that God, in his mercy, “will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea.” [Micah 7:19]

From that idea, Wright paints a picture of how the guilt was to be washed from the hands of the elders, to run down the body of the slain heifer, and then to flow into the stream in the valley, where it would be carried away from the people ... taken far away ... and finally deposited into the depths of the sea. [Wright, 233]

What we have here in the second part of this ritual is a picture of a true washing away of guilt and sin. And the result, we see in verse nine, is that their guilt is purged away from them. The result, we read in verse eight, is atonement: the people are made right again with God.

That's how the God of the Bible deals with sin. He calls on us to bring it to him. He provides for another to die in our place. And then, over that sacrifice, he washes us and makes us right with him.

Though we deserved to die, Jesus Christ died in our place instead. God loves us so much – our life is so valuable to him – that beyond all comprehension, he sent his only Son, Jesus Christ, to die in our place. That's how valuable we are in God's sight – not by any merit of our own, but because of his great love.

And so, God the Son himself has died for us. And by his death, God has washed us clean. Our sin has been carried away from us, by the river of his mercy, and then deposited on the ocean floor. We have been made right with God, despite our guilt. And our only contribution to it all is to cry out to God in faith.

The call to repentance remains – we must take the implications of our passage this morning very seriously in how we view and in how we treat the people around us. But we do it as those who have already been forgiven. We do it as those who have been loved by God. And as he has loved us, so we now seek to love those who bear his image.

And so, what we see in this ritual is the sacred value of human life, which should lead us to repentance towards our neighbor, and faith towards God.

## **Conclusion**

It is God who has placed his image in every person he has made.

It is God who calls us to love our neighbor as ourselves.

And it is God who so exemplified that love by giving his very life for us.

Let us trust in his cleansing grace.

Let us love those he has placed in our life.

And let us strive to see in every human being we encounter the sacred value of their life ... because each and every one of them bears the image of our glorious God and King.

Amen.

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### **This sermon draws on material from:**

- Alter, Robert. *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary*. New York, NY: Norton, 2004.
- Block, Daniel I. *The NIV Application Commentary: Deuteronomy*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012.
- Brown, Raymond. *The Message of Deuteronomy: Not by Bread Alone*. The Bible Speaks Today. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity: 1993.
- Craigie, Peter C. *The Book of Deuteronomy*. NICOT. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976.
- Millar, J. Gary. *Now Choose Life: Theology and Ethics in Deuteronomy*. Downers Grove, IL: Apollos, 1998.
- Theopolis Podcast*. “Episode 688: Atonement for Unsolved Murders (Deuteronomy 21)” November 30, 2023. <https://soundcloud.com/user-812874628/episode-688-atonement-for-unsolved-murders-deuteronomy-21>
- Wright, Christopher. *Deuteronomy*. NIBC. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996.

Note: In my preaching I often cite and draw from a range of sources, which includes material from Christians within my theological tradition, Christians outside my theological tradition (in keeping with our church’s core value of “Reformed Catholicity”), and also (following the Apostle Paul’s example in Acts 17) non-Christians who are well outside of Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy. And so, when I cite an author or a source, that citation should not be understood or construed as me necessarily agreeing with, endorsing, or recommending to others anything else from that author or source, except for what I explicitly say I agree with, endorse, or recommend. When engaging with different materials and thinkers, all Christians must exercise wisdom and discernment to determine what is helpful, appropriate, and edifying for each person, taking into account their current needs, wisdom, and spiritual maturity.