

1. Two lessons back my lesson focused on how God wants us to behave as we go through our daily routines in our own life. The last lesson focused on how we're to behave as we gather together in public settings. This lesson completes a trilogy as it focuses on how we can make a difference for God in our roles as priests. I stated near the end of the last lesson, that Revelation 1:6 refers to all Christians as kings and priests. My point was simply that all Christians will rule with Jesus one day as kings and God gives us all the power we need to make a difference for Him in this world. So that's why the bible refers to us as kings.
 - a) As to priests, I'm not saying we all have to be professional priests. I'm just saying that all Christians are called to make a difference for Jesus. That fact leads me back to this lesson: Two lessons back I focused on how we make a difference for Jesus as we go through our daily lives. The last lesson focused on how we make a difference for Him when we get together publicly. This lesson focuses on how we make a difference for Jesus in our roles as priests that He calls all of us to be in one sense or another.
 - b) As a simple illustration, there was a church I used to belong to that had a sign by the exit of that church that read, "You are now entering your mission field". The purpose of going to church is to gather together as believers to encourage each other and prepare ourselves as we go into our "mission field as priests". Again, I'm not saying God's calling each of us to quit our lives and be a full time missionary. I'm saying if you do believe Jesus died for all the sins you've ever committed or ever will commit then one's purpose in life is to go be a good witness for Him in whatever role we've been called to serve in our lives. These two chapters are great examples of what God wants us and doesn't want us to do as we go and be a witness for Him. With that stated I'm read to explain these two chapters.
 - c) The first part of Chapter 18 gives a quick reminder to the Israelites that came out of Egypt that one of the 12 tribes of Egypt were not like the others. God picked one of those tribes to say in effect, "you guys are to be the priests for all the other tribes". The rough idea is God saying 1 out of 12 Israelites is to be scattered through the land of Israel to help draw the other Israelites closer to Him. Those Israelites don't get a literal portion of the land of Israel like the rest of the Israelites, so they were to get part of what everyone else earns as a fee for the service they perform as priests.
 - i) The point is not that all Christians can demand money from other believers. What the text is implying is that we're to be dependant upon one another as we make a difference for Jesus in the world around us. The idea is to use some of our earnings so we can make a difference for Him in our world. All Christians are called to be on the "front lines" making a difference for Jesus or on the "back lines" supplying the ammunition for those on the front lines. That in effect is also describing this economic system of supporting the priests so they can make a difference for God.
 - ii) In the literal sense, those Israelite priests back then were to live off food donations of the rest of the Israelites. They're also to get the first of wine and oil produced in the land of Israel. Since these priests didn't have land they could work, they lived off of trading what they did receive for what supplies they needed to live and go make a difference for God. Just as us Christian professional priests are dependant upon the generosity of others and support our fellow priests so together we make all make a difference for God in the world around us.
 - iii) Then the text spends a few verses taking about the local priests that wanted to go leave their home to work in the big city. The point is they too must be supported just as we Christians support missionaries that go around the world to making a difference for Jesus. That's why churches support missionaries to all places.

- d) At this point the text switches topics to talk about detestable practices. The point is God wants us to be a witness for Him by preaching His word and not being dependant upon signs and magic to preach the Gospel. The problem with "signs" is that it makes people want another sign and not the truth of the Gospel message. For example we'll read in this text that sorcery and casting spells are forbidden. Is some of that power real? I'd say yes, in that God allows Satan real powers that we as Christians can overcome by relying upon His power to face whatever situation we have to deal with. The power we have through God to make a difference for Him is far greater than any and all power the world can offer as a substitute for the "real thing".
 - e) Then of all things, we get a prediction about Jesus coming into the world. Moses tells of a prophet coming into the world that we should listen to. The word "prophet" is singular so it's not referring to all the Old Testament prophets that came roughly over the next 1,000 years as listed in the Old Testament. It's referring to a single person who we should listen to that is God ordained to guide our lives. Jewish people refer to this coming "prophet" as the Messiah, which is the Jewish word that we translate "Christ" (from the Greek). While the word Messiah is not used in this text, Moses speaks of a key person that will come that all Israelites should listen to for guidance. In fact, John the Baptist was asked if he's that prophet and John said no. John pointed to Jesus as "the guy" Moses spoke of here.
 - f) After a "listen to this prophet" break, the text returns to the concept of how to be a witness for God as we enter Chapter 19. The text focuses on "cities of refuge". These were places a person can run too if they accidentally killed someone. These cities were controlled by the priests and those priests had to decide if a person was guilty of intentional murder or accidental death. If someone was found innocent they had to remain in those cities living under the authority of those priests. The point from the priests (your and my) perspective is that we're to be witnesses to those who made mistakes (think sin) and seek guidance of those who are close to God.
 - g) Those same priests were called to judge sin in the sense that if someone was truly guilty of a crime they still had to be punished. It would make sense that the priests would have to judge if someone was truly guilty or innocent as they controlled these cities. The point for us as priests is we are not to ignore our duties of dealing with criminals as we make a difference for the world around us. As an example, we may witness to someone who is declared guilty of murder but we don't ignore the jail sentence that the courts decided for their punishment. The text is not saying we don't reach out to all people. Moses is saying we need to enforce justice as we draw people closer to Jesus as we be a witness for Him.
2. To summarize these two chapters in a few thoughts: We're called to go into the world to make a difference for Jesus. These chapters lay out a model of how we're to support our missionaries. A function of missionaries is a to make a difference for Jesus in the world around us. They need to eat, so they must be supported. Missionaries are not to use magic arts to preach the Gospel so we learn here what methods to avoid. We as missionaries are to point people to Jesus, which is why the text talks about THE prophet to come. Finally the text talks about as we make a difference for Him we're not to ignore justice for the sake of being a witness. So what do I call this lesson? How to be a witness for Jesus as we go into the world around us. With that said, ready for the details:
 3. Chapter 18, Verse 1: The priests, who are Levites--indeed the whole tribe of Levi--are to have no allotment or inheritance with Israel. They shall live on the offerings made to the LORD by fire, for that is their inheritance. ² They shall have no inheritance among their brothers; the LORD is their inheritance, as he promised them.
 - a) The text starts by reminding the large audience listening to Moses give a speech (as most of the book of Deuteronomy is Moses giving a speech to the Israelites as they're about to enter the land of Israel) that one of the 12 tribes of Israel is not like the others as they're called to be the priests of the other tribes. Why were the Levites picked? It's like asking why are you called to serve Jesus, but not someone else? God picks, who God picks.

- b) This does not mean for example that only one of 12 people are saved. It means that God in His way picks people who can't stand not using their lives to make a difference for God in all that they do. If that describes you, then you are called to be a "priest" whether you like that title or not. As we read about the Levites in these verses, don't think about this specific group of Israelites thousands of years ago, but as our role serving Jesus as we go to make a difference in the lives of people around us.
 - c) By the way, if you don't know, with a few exceptions, most Israelites today have no idea what tribe they are from. That's because when the Romans destroyed the Jewish temple, all the family records were destroyed with it. The exception is a few family names have been associated traditionally with the priests, so such people know they come from that tribe. However, just as any Jewish person today can study to be a rabbi, so any Christian can choose to go into the professional ministry or use their lives to make a difference for Jesus as they go through their daily routines.
 - d) As for these Israelites, they were in charge of leading others closer to God. They would live off of offerings given to them. They didn't have a share of the land given to the rest of the Israelites, just as Christians are to look to heaven as our home and not here on earth.
4. Verse 3: This is the share due the priests from the people who sacrifice a bull or a sheep: the shoulder, the jowls and the inner parts. ⁴ You are to give them the firstfruits of your grain, new wine and oil, and the first wool from the shearing of your sheep, ⁵ for the LORD your God has chosen them and their descendants out of all your tribes to stand and minister in the LORD's name always.
- a) The best way to explain this is that the Israelites lived in an agricultural society. Instead of trading what they grew or raised for money, God is saying give the "first" of what you raised to God. For farm animals, this included the shoulder, the jowl (the fleshy part of an animal's neck) and the "inner parts". For example, if we either eat or sacrifice the rear end and the "body" of an animal, the other parts were given to the priest so they have things to eat or trade for their other needs. Think of it as giving them 10% of an animal. The same idea applies to raising grain (say wheat or barley), grapes, or olives, or even if one made a living by shearing sheep. The idea is to give the first of what we give to the priests.
 - b) Let me discuss for a moment the idea of Christians and tithing. I can't find any reference in the New Testament that requires Christians to tithe their income. The New Testament has a lot of references that Christians should give, but not tithing. Some churches argue it is an Old Testament command still on the books for Christians, but I'll debate that. What is important is that we need to financially support those who are on the "front lines" who are making a difference for Jesus. Remember what Jesus calls us to do: Go into the world and make disciples of all nations. My point is to give part of our income to support those in the professional ministry or support missionaries we are doing what Jesus told us to do as His disciples. Therefore, while we may not give "10% of a sheep", we are to give part of our earnings so we can make a difference for Jesus in our world.
 - c) Bottom line is just as God picked one of the 12 tribes to be the priests, so God calls specific Christians to be ministers and missionaries for Him. So how do I know if I'm called for a role like that? The answer is we can't stand not doing it. It's that simple.
5. Verse 6: If a Levite moves from one of your towns anywhere in Israel where he is living, and comes in all earnestness to the place the LORD will choose, ⁷ he may minister in the name of the LORD his God like all his fellow Levites who serve there in the presence of the LORD. ⁸ He is to share equally in their benefits, even though he has received money from the sale of family possessions.
- a) The way I describe these verses is "What if a priest wants to move away from his family to go serve in a city somewhere else?" Their answer is they're free to do so. That priest can take his share of the family possessions and go where he feels lead to go, so he can serve as a priest where he feels lead to be a priest.

- b) Let me discuss one of the great Christian debates about male versus female ministers. To state the obvious, this has been debated for 2,000 years and I'm not going to solve it here. The best answer I can give is that God calls men to lead. Because in a lot of churches, not enough men step up to lead, a lot of women lead. Is there a problem with any woman to go be a missionary or even be a minister in church? In most cases, no, but I hold the view that God called men to be the church leaders, and from there, anyone can be involved in the process of making a difference for Jesus in the world.
 - c) Coming back to these verses, the important idea is that the Jewish priests back then were not required to minister "where they were born", but could go to where the tabernacle and later the Temple was located to go work there. My view of ministry is we go to where the need is and where we can make a difference for Jesus. One of the great joys of life is when we figure out what we're good at or what we enjoy doing anyway, and find a way to use those gifts to make a difference for Jesus. It can be as simple as working with children or it can be a desire to see other parts of the world so we can minister to people there. There are times where we minister based on the needs of our church and there are times where we can go do what we love to do so we can make a difference for God. As to these verses they are here so that the Israelites were not forbidden from "going elsewhere" to minister and not be required to stay where they were raised. If you haven't figured it out by now, I see these verses as an Old Testament equivalent that God wants some of us to go out into the world so we can make a difference for Him and not just work in our hometowns.
6. Verse 9: When you enter the land the LORD your God is giving you, do not learn to imitate the detestable ways of the nations there. ¹⁰ Let no one be found among you who sacrifices his son or daughter in the fire, who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, ¹¹ or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead. ¹² Anyone who does these things is detestable to the LORD, and because of these detestable practices the LORD your God will drive out those nations before you. ¹³ You must be blameless before the LORD your God.
- a) The topic moves from "Who is to go", to "How do we act?" If we feel called to go make a difference for Jesus either just where we are or somewhere else in the world, it'd be logical that God would have a few words to say about "Do this and don't do that".
 - b) What's interesting to consider is that there were lots of superstitions back then that are not commented upon here in the bible. Yet these specific practices as stated in these verses are never to be practiced by the priests let alone the Israelites. I could probably give a whole lesson on each one of these, and the damage done by them. Here's the main point: To do any of these things gets people away from God's Word and onto "signs" for guidance. It's amazing that throughout history, people have always looked for the miraculous in order to help with their situation. Instead of just trusting God and trusting that He is guiding our lives for His glory, people want "special signs" as proof of divine guidance. A classic problem with signs is that they're never enough. It just makes someone want to have the next sign. I can tell you of lives that have been ruined by those receiving some sort of a sign, and then when the "signs stopped" and they suffered.
 - c) Let me describe these signs another way. When we lose a loved one, we are grieving and would love to communicate with them again. That is why "charlatans" exist who want to get us to communicate with the dead. That's why throughout history there are those who claim they can "cast spells" or contact the dead as it fulfills our need to be in contact with someone we love but has past away. Do I believe such "artists" have real power? Yes in that God allows them some power so that the alternative of turning from God is tempting. Of course the power of the true God is greater, but one has to be aware of the danger of a person trusting in signs as opposed to just trusting in God.
 - d) Let me describe "healing ministries" for a second. If people have that power, why aren't they going to hospitals and clearing them out? I've seen my share of true miracles, but for the most part, God allows us to go through tough times to grow in our trust in Him.

- e) So are you saying we should never pray for a healing miracle? God can do what He wants when He wants and since we don't know God's will, we're welcome to ask all we want. I believe what God is communicating in these verses is not to be dependant upon miracles in order to make a difference for God in the world around us. The way we're called to go minister to others is to teach what God's word says about sin and how Jesus paid the full price for our sins, and by living to make a difference for Jesus, we can live a far greater life than by any other choice we can make for our own lives.
 - f) Before I move on I would also argue there's another reason why God choose these specific categories for priests to avoid: They are "entry points" into the demonic world. When my children were little I never allowed them to play with Ouija boards because I saw them as such entry point, and I want to avoid even the possibility of any entry points into a world of demonology that these specific categories. If you have doubts about this, Google that topic and such stories will come up. Yes I can give biblical examples of each category that are listed in the text and how Israelites got in trouble when they got involved in one or more of those categories, but what we have to remember is "God listed these for a reason" and the safe bet is to trust that God's word is true and He knows what's best for our lives.
7. Verse 14: The nations you will dispossess listen to those who practice sorcery or divination. But as for you, the LORD your God has not permitted you to do so.
- a) The last verse on this topic reminds us that the land the Israelites are going to possess are filled with people who do practice these things. Let me come back to that list of bad things one more time. The first thing on that list was about sacrificing one's children to gods. In that culture, the idea was that if one trusted in a god, to sacrifice one's children (literally) is to trust in that god to provide more for you. God's effectively saying, I do care about all life, so to kill a person to provide more blessings disgusts Me. One of the reasons God did call on the Israelites to completely wipe out that nation is due to that practice so that His people wouldn't ever want to live that way.
 - b) So why can't the Israelites just say, "We find what you do disgusting, we'd never act that way and just leave them alone?" Part of the answer is respect for human life. Even when it comes to sorcery or divination, the idea is so such practices wouldn't be a temptation for the Israelites. To wipe it out is like God saying, "I find trusting in signs for one's life to be so disgusting, it needs to be wiped out, so it doesn't affect My people". So why don't we today kill those who practice such things? Today the issue is the "church" and the church is to be "in the world but not part of it". God wants us to be witnesses to those who have turned from God in their lives. I've met a few Christians who have come from demonic backgrounds and by the grace of God and by others willing to minister to them, they've changed their lives and are now making a difference for Jesus in their lives.
8. Verse 15: The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him.
- a) Here is my favorite verse in the lesson. The transition is, "If we can't do this or that thing as a witness for God, what do we do? Who will guide us as we go make a difference for God in the world around us? In effect, this verse is a call to study the whole bible and not just the words of Moses as we make a difference for God in the world around us. To state the obvious, the priests at this time only had Moses' words for guidance. It also tells them that a specific prophet will come into the world in the future and they should always be on the lookout for this prophet. The word Messiah is not used in this text, but trust me as I say that "THE" prophet is also THE Messiah.
 - b) The classic example of this is when the religious leaders of Jesus' day questioned John the Baptist about who he was. They asked him if he was "THE" prophet that Moses spoke of? John said no and said his job was to point people to Jesus. If you want to know who's the prophet that Moses predicted would come into the world that would lead billions to the God of the bible, Jesus has and is fulfilling that role. (See Gospel of John 1:19-20.)

9. Verse 16: For this is what you asked of the LORD your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said, "Let us not hear the voice of the LORD our God nor see this great fire anymore, or we will die."
- a) There is more we're going to say about "THE" prophet in Verse 17-22, but first Moses will make a point about something that happened roughly 40 years prior to this speech: That is the Israelites were afraid to hear God's voice when the 10 Commandments were given audibly to the Israelites back then. The point is the voice of God scared them so they told Moses in effect, "You listen to what God says and then tell us what He says. We're afraid to hear God's voice for ourselves."
 - b) Let me address why people deep down don't want to hear God's voice for themselves. It comes down to the fact most people just want to live their lives without any interference from God. Some are willing to hear preachers once a week to take away their guilt of any relationship with God, but bottom line is they don't want to hear from God directly. That is why we read of Moses being the spokesman between God the Israelites. What if I want to hear from God? You do every time you open up God's word. What if I'd want to hear more than that? I'm convinced that if the God who created you and cares about your life wants to communicate something to you, He'll find a way and we don't have to strain to hear His voice. In the meantime, the best way to use our time is to make a difference for Him by living as He desires we live as guided by this book.
 - c) In the meantime, it's time for Moses to come back to describing "The" prophet:
10. Verse 17: The LORD said to me: "What they say is good. ¹⁸ I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers; I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him. ¹⁹ If anyone does not listen to my words that the prophet speaks in my name, I myself will call him to account. ²⁰ But a prophet who presumes to speak in my name anything I have not commanded him to say, or a prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, must be put to death."
- a) Before I say anything else, notice the reference to a particular prophet in Verse 17 and all other prophets in Verse 20. What is implied is there will be true and false prophets will be part of the lives of people who trust in God. So how do we tell the difference? That's easy. The way to tell if someone is a true prophet of God is based on what he or she says about God in what they predict. I'll get back to that in a moment. First, let me get back to "The" prophet as referred to in Verses 17 and 18. While I've discussed a lot in all of these lessons about how Christians are supposed to interpret Deuteronomy, here we get the first direct message by Moses that God will raise up a specific prophet from the Israelite people that God wants the Israelites to listen to.
 - b) So why doesn't Moses say, "This prophet will claim to be God's Son and He'll die for all of your sins?" If this prediction is about Jesus, why isn't it more blunt? First the point of this prediction is not to describe every aspect of Jesus' life, but just to tell the Israelites there is coming a day in the future where a great prophet will arise and He will guide you into the truth of God, and the Israelites should be on the lookout for this prophet always. So why didn't Moses say this prophet is God's son? The answer is God wants each of us to figure that out by ourselves by studying Jesus' life. The same with Jesus' death for our sins.
 - i) By the way, after "THE" Pentecost event in Acts Chapter 2, Peter told many Jewish people in Jerusalem at that time that Jesus is literally the fulfillment of what Moses is saying here in Deuteronomy Chapter 18. (See Acts 3:22-24). My point is when the Spirit of God comes upon us, we too can realize Jesus is the prophet Moses is discussing here in these verses.
 - c) With that point about Jesus made, let me talk a little about all other "prophets". When we think of prophets, we think of people predicting the future. The text is saying unless such a prophet is 100% accurate in his or her predictions, they're not sent from me. That's how one can tell a true prophet from a false one, based on the accuracy of the predictions.

- d) Since I'm discussing prophesy, a few more comments before I move on to Chapter 19. An Old Testament prophesy is often in "patterns". What I mean by that is a prophet may give a prediction that comes true say 100 years later, and comes true again thousands of years later. The most famous example is Ezekiel. He predicted while the Israelites were taken into captivity by the Babylonians (think Iraq) that Israel once again would be a nation one day in the future. After 70 years of captivity, they were allowed to return to that land but as part of the Persian (think Iran) Empire. It wasn't until roughly 2,500 years after what he (Ezekiel) predicted that Israel became an independent country again. My point as one is reading bible prophecy, it often works in patterns. Old Testament prophets predictions have come true and also teach repeatable patterns that came come true over history based on our collective and individual response to how God's called us to live as a witness for Him.
- i) Also understand that if you and I are speaking God's truth such as teaching a bible lesson, technically we are prophesizing as to teach God's truth is what prophesy is all about. That's different from the formal office of say an Old Testament prophet who was a person called by God to reveal His truths to us. What's interesting to me is to consider the concept that there is nothing God wants us to know about our lives that He hasn't revealed to His prophets. (See Amos 3:7.)
 - ii) Are there predictions by the Old Testament prophets that have yet to be fulfilled? Of course. The most famous of those are the one's about the events tied to Jesus' Second Coming and life in this world about what happens after the Messiah (who we Christians argue is Jesus) will literally rule over our world. However, those predictions were never proved "untrue" historically so they still stand the test of time until they either do, or don't come true. We know those Old Testament men were prophets because they also made lots of other predictions that literally have come true over time. The bottom line here is simply we can tell a true or a false prophet by whether or not everything they predict will come true.
11. Verse 21: You may say to yourselves, "How can we know when a message has not been spoken by the LORD?" ²² If what a prophet proclaims in the name of the LORD does not take place or come true, that is a message the LORD has not spoken. That prophet has spoken presumptuously. Do not be afraid of him.
- a) As I've implied just before listing these verses, the simple way to tell if someone has a true or false message from God, is simply to see whether or not their predictions are true over a period of time. So how do we tell say a prophet from someone who has demonic power or just a "trickster"? First, there is the 100% accuracy test. Next, such predictions will not go against what God's word already predicts to date. In the Old Testament one can find a few "false prophets" here and there, usually to challenge the words of a true prophet. As we study history, one can pretty easily see which prediction came true. For example, in the books of Jeremiah and Ezekiel there were false prophets listed who predicted the fall of Babylon immediately, or that the Israelites would not go into captivity into that nation.
 - b) Now comes a more important point for us Christians. Hebrews 1:2 says, "but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe." That just means since Jesus there are no more official prophets like those of the Old Testament as now Christians are just to listen to Jesus who not only was a prophet (as He predicted how He'll die and rise again as well as the future of the nation of Israel) but is also the God who created in the universe in the first place.
 - i) The point is the reason there are no more prophets like those in the Old Testament is that Jesus is the "end" of that line of prophesy. Yes of course, there are preachers today speaking God's word and the book of Acts (11:28) refers to Agabus, who did predict a great famine. God can reveal "stuff" to us, but that's different that being a classical Old Testament prophet who reveals God's truth to all it's readers.

12. Chapter 19, Verse 1: When the LORD your God has destroyed the nations whose land he is giving you, and when you have driven them out and settled in their towns and houses, ² then set aside for yourselves three cities centrally located in the land the LORD your God is giving you to possess. ³ Build roads to them and divide into three parts the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance, so that anyone who kills a man may flee there.
- a) Remember that we took a break from the main theme of discussing our role as "priests" in the world to discuss "the" prophet in the last part of Chapter 18. In effect, that whole talk stayed on topic as the role of Christians is to lead people to Jesus and help others grow in our relationship with Him. Therefore as we Christians fulfill our role as God's priests to the world, think of that last section as describing whom we lead people to (Jesus).
 - b) With that said, this chapter continues that thought of how we as "priests" can be a good witness to others. To begin, let me give a little overview of the "Cities of Refuge". Moses says here in these verses that after the Israelites have conquered this land, they are to set up three cities that people can run to for safety if anyone who accidentally kills someone can run to for protection. To explain what that means, time for a little background:
 - i) Moses had already instructed the Israelites to have three "Cities of Refuge" in the land they already conquered east of "Israel proper". This was described back in Numbers Chapter 35. Now that the Israelites are about to conquer "Israel proper" Moses is saying to set up three more cities like the one's already set up.
 - ii) If one looks at a map of Israel, it is more "length" than "width". Therefore Moses says to set up one city in the northern part of Israel, one in the middle and one in the south. Again, the purpose of these cities, is for a place to flee to if a murder is accidentally done. What was told in Numbers, but not repeated here, is that cities controlled by the priests were to be these refuge cities.
 - iii) At that time, there was no organized police force. Therefore, it was the duty of the nearest living relative to the person who was killed to bring to justice any person guilty of murder. They literally had a right to kill such a person in revenge. If the person who committed the crime could make it to one of these refuge cities, they'd be safe until the priests can hold a fair trial. To state the obvious, someone guilty of true murder who didn't want to die would run to these cities as well, therefore the priests who lived in that town had to judge the criminals. Much of the rest of this chapter will focus on the issue of how to separate the guilty from the innocent.
 - c) OK that's interesting I suppose. What does any of this have to do with our Christian role as "priests"? Glad you asked. First there is the idea that God does expect us Christians to judge actions. Are we to witness to all people? Of course. At the same time, we're not to let the guilty get away with crime and such people should be brought to the authorities to stand trial. I remember a pastor I studied under many years ago. He said, "Do I have any problem pulling the switch for the electric chair? No, none at all. I would witness to that person as long as he or she is alive, but then my job as a "priest" is to do justice as well."
 - i) Before we get into more specifics about justice that cover the rest of the chapter, its worth repeating a few other key points that were stated in Numbers 35. First, if a person was guilty of accidental murder as described later in this chapter, they had to live in one of these cities until the current high priest dies. Now think of what sets us free as Christians: The death of our high priest (Jesus). Until we accept the idea of Jesus death as payment of our sins, we are guilty of "accidental murder" in that we reject His payment for our sins. God wants Christians to be witnesses to those who do reject His Son as payment for their sins. That's why we read of this symbolism of fleeing to a city controlled by priests to learn how us priests live (as living witnesses for Jesus) and we're not free until "the High Priest dies".
 - ii) Moses does not give all of those details here in Deuteronomy 19 as those listening to his speech know this stuff as Numbers 35 wasn't that long before this date.

- iii) Therefore, the reason this speech is given here in Deuteronomy is not to repeat all of the details of the cities of refuge, but to explain how it is we priests are to judge those who claim they are fleeing to us based on an accidental murder and not for a crime they intended to carry out. To explain the difference, let's read on:
- 13. Verse 4: This is the rule concerning the man who kills another and flees there to save his life--one who kills his neighbor unintentionally, without malice aforethought. ⁵ For instance, a man may go into the forest with his neighbor to cut wood, and as he swings his ax to fell a tree, the head may fly off and hit his neighbor and kill him. That man may flee to one of these cities and save his life. ⁶ Otherwise, the avenger of blood might pursue him in a rage, overtake him if the distance is too great, and kill him even though he is not deserving of death, since he did it to his neighbor without malice aforethought. ⁷ This is why I command you to set aside for yourselves three cities.
- a) Moses gives a wonderful example of the difference between an accidental murder versus killing someone on purpose. The example is essentially, you and a friend go out to chop some wood. The handle of the ax (or maybe a chainsaw today) slips out of our hands and accidentally kills the other person. The nearest living adult relative to the person who is killed by accident has the legal right to perform justice and kill the murder. That person who accidentally killed someone can now run to one of these cities of refuge where he or she can live amongst priests until that murderer can stand trial for that act. If the killer is found innocent, again they have to stay living in that city until the top (high) priest dies.
 - b) What if the person fleeing to that city is not found innocent? We'll get to that later in this lesson. In the meantime, we get a few more verses on the principal of these cities:
- 14. Verse 8: If the LORD your God enlarges your territory, as he promised on oath to your forefathers, and gives you the whole land he promised them, ⁹ because you carefully follow all these laws I command you today--to love the LORD your God and to walk always in his ways--then you are to set aside three more cities. ¹⁰ Do this so that innocent blood will not be shed in your land, which the LORD your God is giving you as your inheritance, and so that you will not be guilty of bloodshed.
- a) If one goes back to Genesis 15:18, God told Abraham that the Promised Land will extend from the Euphrates River in Iraq to the Nile River in Egypt. The point is the Israelites did not ever conquer all the land that was originally promised to them. I believe when Jesus comes back to set up His eternal kingdom, "Israel" will be a lot bigger then, then as it exist today or historically. Even at the peak of it's power under King David, the land of Israel was never as big as promised to Abraham.
 - b) All of that history does lead back to these verses. The essential idea is that God promised the Israelites that He would bless them based on their trust in Him. When they expanded their territory beyond the traditional borders they were to have three more "Refuge Cities" to the six they were to set up: three in Israel, three east of Israel in the area they've already conquered prior to Moses speech. The point is Moses promised they could have a total of nine of these cities if they conquered all that God wanted them to conquer.
 - i) OK, so what does any of that have to do with us? The Promised Land as I love to state, is about trusting God with every aspect of our lives. If the Cities of Refuge is symbolic of us being a witness to nonbelievers to show them the significance of the death of "THE" High Priest, think of it as God promising to increase our influence for Jesus as we grow in our trust in Him in all that we do.
 - c) All of this leads me to Verse 10: The reason Moses is preaching this speech about setting up these cities. God cares about human life. This is about preserving innocent lives so we don't put to death someone who doesn't deserve the death penalty. But doesn't God also want us to witness to those guilty of murder as well as other crimes? Yes, but never to a point of ignoring justice. Do I believe there are murderers in heaven? Of course, as God forgives all sins other than a lifelong denial of Jesus payment for those sins.

15. Verse 11: But if a man hates his neighbor and lies in wait for him, assaults and kills him, and then flees to one of these cities,¹² the elders of his town shall send for him, bring him back from the city, and hand him over to the avenger of blood to die.¹³ Show him no pity. You must purge from Israel the guilt of shedding innocent blood, so that it may go well with you.
- a) From Verse 11 to the end of the chapter, the focus is no longer on those who accidentally kill someone, but on dealing with those who are truly guilty. Let's be honest, if someone killed someone on purpose, they're not going to want to die, so they'd run to these cities to avoid being killed by the nearest living relative. Remember the focus here is not on the one's committing the crime, but on the judges who are judging the crime. Again recall the priests control all the cities of refuge. Therefore in our role as Christian "priests" we must judge sin, not in terms of eternal judgment, but in terms of what we should allow in our society. To put this another way, God is a God of justice and He expects those of us who trust in Him to execute justice as well.
 - b) That does not mean God wants us to hand-kill murderers. The point is we're not to let a person who commits such a crime to get away with it. While the justice system is far from perfect, it's still far better than to live in a society where no justice is ever performed in the first place. I figure if God has no problem with the death penalty, He knows better than I do, so I trust in Him for such judgment decisions. Do I still witness to those who've done such crimes? Of course. Not long ago, I read a book about a pastor who was assigned to the Germans who were on trial at Nuremberg after World War II. Some of those Germans still prayed and came to Jesus and others did not. Did that pastor have an issue with their execution? Probably not, but in the meantime he was still called to be a witness to them. In effect, that's a wonderful description of our role as Christian "priests": To still execute a role of justice while witnessing to others while that trial is occurring. What that pastor did at those trials fits well with the role of executioner here in these verses.
 - c) It is key to remember that if heaven is God's domain, then He and He alone gets to decide who will be with Him forever. God gave earth to people to rule over, therefore we should decide who should live in our society or not. This is why I never have a problem with the death penalty for those who've been found guilty of murder. As my former pastor put it, I'd still witness to them, but then I don't have a problem "pulling the switch" as well.
 - d) What about crimes lower than murder? The next set of verses gets into that issue.
16. Verse 14: Do not move your neighbor's boundary stone set up by your predecessors in the inheritance you receive in the land the LORD your God is giving you to possess.
- a) As we all can tell by now, the issue at hand is being a judge as a witness for God. Notice in this verse about respecting boundaries, there is no discussion of the death penalty. The verse is not saying we put to death those who don't respect one's boundaries. It just says we're to respect boundaries, period. Punishment for violating boundaries should be in proportion to the crime, which is what is implied in the next few verses.
 - b) Speaking of other books I've read, years ago, I read a wonderful book on "boundaries". It can be everything from what boundaries we put up with in dealing with our children to issues with our neighbors or our country. Remember that one of the 10 Commandments is against stealing. If God is anti-stealing, that also means He believes in the right for us to own things. If we own things, we set up boundaries so others can't steal them. What we have in this verse is essentially the point about respecting boundaries, which as most of us know, is a whole separate lesson onto itself.
 - c) The point in context of the surrounding verses is about respecting boundaries. In our job as being a witness for Jesus (that is, "a priest") we are to respect each other's boundaries. For example, if someone steals, they should be punished in a way where one has to return what was stolen. That's the underlying principal behind this verse and also in our role as priests. To put this another way, as witnesses for Jesus, that doesn't mean we let people get away with stuff, including stealing and not respecting other people's boundaries.

17. Verse 15: One witness is not enough to convict a man accused of any crime or offense he may have committed. A matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.
 - a) In the last lesson, I discussed a verse that talked about how no one is to be put to death without the testimony of two or more witnesses in agreement on the crime committed. (See Deuteronomy 17:6). That principal is repeated here, but in this case, the emphasis is on "judging" who is guilty. The point for those priests in Israel is they were not allowed to punish anyone unless two or more witnesses agreed to what was done.
 - b) In today's world of scientific evidence, one can be found guilty of a crime, if there is only one witness and enough scientific proof of the crime committed. In our world where we can prove someone's guilt using fingerprints and DNA evidence, I don't have a problem with convicting someone by one witness or outstanding evidence. In effect the detectives or professionals who discovered that evidence is a witness to that crime. The whole idea of this verse is to prevent one's person word going against another person's word in order to convict someone than just one person's word against another. This verse is a principal used for justice in ancient Israel as well as in most courtrooms today and that's why it's listed here in Deuteronomy for us.
18. Verse 16: If a malicious witness takes the stand to accuse a man of a crime,¹⁷ the two men involved in the dispute must stand in the presence of the LORD before the priests and the judges who are in office at the time.¹⁸ The judges must make a thorough investigation, and if the witness proves to be a liar, giving false testimony against his brother,¹⁹ then do to him as he intended to do to his brother. You must purge the evil from among you.²⁰ The rest of the people will hear of this and be afraid, and never again will such an evil thing be done among you.
 - a) Let me give one of my rough translations here: If someone claiming to be a witness to a crime turns out to be a liar in that situation, then that liar must suffer the punishment that was meant for the victim in the first place. As a simple example, if someone who hates us accuses of stealing just because they hate us, that false witness should be punished as we would have gotten if we were found guilty of that crime.
 - b) The issue isn't about lying in general, just lying in that criminal trial. Remember what is the underlying issue: How God wants us to be priests as witnesses for Him. It should be more than just telling people about Jesus and helping them draw closer to Him. Our role as priests should never be to a point where we ignore justice just so we can witness to the guilty person some more. To state what should be obvious, God cares about our salvation and also cares about our society here and now. We shouldn't ignore justice so we can be a good "witness" to the guilty. In these verses, the issue isn't just the guilt or innocence of those accused of a crime, but the one's bringing the charges up in the first place.
 - c) These verses are here in the bible to discourage someone against bringing up false charges to someone out of their anger at another person in general. The punishment for lying in a criminal matter is the person found guilty of lying can suffer the same punishment as the one on trial to begin with. That should "do the trick".
19. Verse 21: Show no pity: life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.
 - a) This verse essentially says, "The punishment should fit the crime". It also shows that not every crime deserves the death penalty. To state the obvious, the verse is saying that if a person is guilty of murder, they deserve to die. I should state here that the verse is very specific in stating murder and not killing. Remember why the Israelites were to kill all the people living there in the first place. It was God's judgment against them as to say, "They are beyond help and the most merciful thing I can do is put that society out of its misery as they had no respect for human life as they put innocent people to death".
 - b) So does this verse mean if someone was guilty of cutting off someone's hand or foot, then the appropriate punishment is to cut off their foot? I suppose so. I think a better sentence is to make the guilty make up for the loss. If someone can no longer say, walk or run due to a crime, the criminal should if possible make restitution appropriate to that crime.

- c) Let me think of an extreme example: Suppose someone was wounded and the one found guilty of that crime is now dead or mentally can't help the one that was hurt. Then we as a society should help just as we help wounded soldiers who come back from war. I'm big on forgiving those who hurt us not so they can get away "Scott free", but so we no longer let them keep on hurting us mentally by what they did. Forgiveness should never include a lack of justice. That's another underlying point of this whole chapter. What this means for us as "Priests" for Jesus, is we incorporate justice into our roles as witnesses for Him as part of making our role of making a difference for others as witnesses for Him.
20. Remember that the whole lesson is about how God wants us to be a good witness for Him as we go through our lives. That's why Chapter 18 started out stating God wants some of His people to be "priests" (witnesses to the other Israelites). Then the text focuses on "The" Prophet which is a title for Jesus. In other words, in our role as priests, we are to lead others to Him. That's why God set of the "cities of refuge" so that priests can lead others to Jesus and explain how His death frees us from having to live in those cities so we can then go be priests to others. Finally we got a whole section about not ignoring justice while we're to be a witness for God. There, that's the last two chapters in one paragraph. With that stated, I can close in prayer.
21. Heavenly Father, help us to understand our role as priests for You. Help us to be a good witness to others around us as we point them to Your prophet who died for our sins. As we lead others in and out of cities of refuge, guide our words and our actions so we can be the type of priests to lead others closer to You. Finally, help us to not ignore justice as we lead the guilty closer to You as we're all guilty of sin. We ask this in Jesus name, Amen.