

# Deuteronomy 19:15-21

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*Moses addressed the matter of witnesses and testimony in the Israelite community.*

Witnesses were an important part of the judicial system in the ancient Near Eastern world. Countries relied on the presence of witnesses to attest business transactions and to testify in legal matters. This system was also applicable in Israel as a measure to deter corruption. So, to protect the life of each individual Israelite from being a victim of false testimony, Moses issued a safeguard. He required more than one witness in judicial proceedings to authenticate an accusation against somebody.

In order to maintain the integrity of the judicial system, Moses declared that *a single witness shall not rise up against a man* (v. 15). A testimony of one person was to be considered insufficient. One person might testify falsely against another for various reasons, such as hatred and self-seeking interest. Thus, Moses prohibited a single testimony to be accepted by the Israelite community. This prohibition extended beyond idolatry (17:6) to include *any iniquity or any sin which a man had committed*.

Moses made it clear to Israel that *a matter would only be confirmed on the evidence of two or three witnesses*. The phrase *on the evidence* is literally “at the mouth of,” indicating that the testimony was spoken. It was necessary to have at least two people to testify about the matter before it could be established. This preventive measure would add an element of credibility to the matter and would prevent the innocent party from being falsely accused and judged.

Moses went on to elaborate on the problem of false testimony by giving a scenario whereby *a malicious witness rises up against a man to accuse him of wrongdoing* (v. 16). A *malicious witness* is someone who violates the truth to harm someone else ([Exodus 23:1](#); [Psalms 35:11](#)). The word translated here as *wrongdoing* is translated in 13:5 [13:6, in Hebrew] as “rebellion” (that is, rebellion against the LORD). It has the same meaning in [Isaiah 1:5](#) and [Jeremiah 28:16](#).

Once the accusation had been made, *both the men who have the dispute shall stand before the LORD, before the priests and the judges who will be in office in those days*. That is, both the accuser and the accused had to go to where the LORD dwelt among His people at the time and appear before the *priests*. The *priests* ministered in the presence of the Suzerain God. They also offered sacrifices to God (2 Chron. 29:11) and pronounced the priestly benediction on God's people (Numbers 6:24-26). The term *judge* here refers to the one who conducts legal procedures among people in a society.

Once the matter was brought before the authorities, the *judges* were to *investigate* it *thoroughly*. (v. 18). To *investigate thoroughly* is to make a careful inquiry, a careful search to determine if the accusation was true or false. If the judges find that *the witness is a false witness and he has accused his brother falsely*, then there needed to be consequences upon the false witness.

The judges were to *do to him just as he had intended to do to his brother*. Thus, after careful investigation, if the results indicated that the testimony was false, the accuser was to suffer the same penalty that would have been inflicted on the accused were he to have been convicted. Doing so would *purge the evil from among* the Israelite community. The verb *purge* (Heb. "bā'ar") literally means "to burn." It connotes the idea of burning something to remove it completely from a certain place, like burning away thorns from a field. By visiting the punishment one person unjustly wished upon another, God's justice system would encourage each Israelite to follow His command to treat their fellows as they desired to be treated, thus bringing about community harmony.

In addition to maintaining the purity of Israelite society, this was to be an example to others, that *the rest will hear and be afraid, and will never again do such an evil thing among you*. The punishment of the liar would then serve to discourage the Israelites from committing the same sin by instilling fear of the consequences in them, were they to give a false testimony.

In response to the punishment of the false accuser, the people were to *not show pity; life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot*. The punishment was to properly fit the crime. The false accuser was to receive the proper punishment, just as they wished upon the one they falsely accused. Losing an eye would be a severe consequence, while losing a tooth would be a far lesser punishment. The principle is one of reciprocity. Small crimes were to have small punishments, severe crimes severe. In the case of the false witness, they were to receive whatever punishment fit the false

accusation. This principle of reciprocity also appears in [Exodus 21:23-25](#) and [Leviticus 24:17-21](#). It was to ensure that justice was administered properly in Israel.

The LORD's covenant people needed to know that no one is allowed to harm an innocent person's life through making false accusation. The justice system was not to be twisted or abused. It was to protect life and property, not bring harm.

### **Biblical Text:**

**<sup>15</sup> A single witness shall not rise up against a man on account of any iniquity or any sin which he has committed; on the evidence of two or three witnesses a matter shall be confirmed. <sup>16</sup> If a malicious witness rises up against a man to accuse him of wrongdoing, <sup>17</sup> then both the men who have the dispute shall stand before the Lord, before the priests and the judges who will be *in office* in those days. <sup>18</sup> The judges shall investigate thoroughly, and if the witness is a false witness *and* he has accused his brother falsely, <sup>19</sup> then you shall do to him just as he had intended to do to his brother. Thus you shall purge the evil from among you. <sup>20</sup> The rest will hear and be afraid, and will never again do such an evil thing among you. <sup>21</sup> Thus you shall not show pity: life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.**