

# Deuteronomy 24:19-22

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*Moses asks owners of fields and orchards to leave a portion of their harvest for the alien, the orphan, and the widow.*

Continuing the issue of how the Israelites were to treat the underprivileged, Moses turned to the issue of food. His instructions included three principal agricultural products in ancient Israel—grain, olives, and grapes.

Beginning with the grain, he told the people that *when you reap your harvest in your field and have forgotten a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it* (v. 19). A *sheaf* refers to harvested grain that is cut and bound together into a bundle.

The Israelite farmer could cut down his grain (usually, wheat and barley) but was forbidden to go back and pick up a forgotten *sheaf*. What was left or *forgotten* was to be left for the *alien*, the *orphan*, and the *widow*, since they were among the less fortunate in Israelite society (vv. 17-18). While this act of generosity benefited the landless and the poor, it also yielded positive results for the farmer. They were to do this act of generosity *in order that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands*.

The same principle concerning grain applied *when you beat your olive tree*. Here, the farmers were to *not go over the boughs again* (v. 20). In ancient Israel, olive trees were essential to produce olive oil. Olives were handpicked, shaken, or beaten from the tree with a long pole. By law, the Israelite farmers could only go over the boughs once (the boughs refer to the main branch of the tree). Any *olives* that did not fall off the first time were to be left *for the alien, for the orphan, and for the widow*.

This was also true for the grape harvest. Landowners and harvesters were commanded to *gather the grapes of their vineyard* once (v. 21). They could not *go over* those grapes and pick the clusters that were overlooked. Once again, any leftover was *for the alien, for the orphan, and for the widow*.

The motive behind such treatment for the destitute was to remind each Israelite that they were once *a slave in the land of Egypt* (v. 22). This reminder

would motivate the people to treat the *alien, orphan, and widow* in a benevolent manner.

The Suzerain God promised to reward His vassals (in this case, the Israelite farmers) for their charitable action toward the needy because such an attitude truly reflects God's own character. In fact, the LORD was the one who gave the land to His people and the one who caused it to yield its fruits and produces. Thus, sharing a portion of grain to those who were in need would not cause the people of Israel to suffer economic hardship. Rather, it would bring greater wealth and prosperity. Also, leaving a portion of the crops for them would enable them to participate in the blessings of the land which the Suzerain (Ruler) God had given to His people.

It is worth noting that the poor maintained the dignity of work, and of making choices for themselves. It was still left unto them to gather what was left over. This principle of "gleaning" is a central part of the story of Ruth. She was poor, and went to the fields to gather leftover parts of the crop in order to provide for herself and her mother-in-law ([Ruth 2:2-23](#)).

#### **Biblical Text:**

**<sup>19</sup>When you reap your harvest in your field and have forgotten a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be for the alien, for the orphan, and for the widow, in order that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. <sup>20</sup>When you beat your olive tree, you shall not go over the boughs again; it shall be for the alien, for the orphan, and for the widow. <sup>21</sup>When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, you shall not go over it again; it shall be for the alien, for the orphan, and for the widow. <sup>22</sup>You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I am commanding you to do this thing.**