

Innocent Blood

Who keeps track of innocent blood, such as that of 13-year-old Darius Simmons when he was shot by a neighbor while taking out the trash in Milwaukee, Wisconsin? Who tallies the number of times little girls spending the night at sleepovers open the front door to a barrage of deadly gunfire? Eight-year-old Alaysha Carradine died in Oakland, California, last year, just like that. Add them to the growing pool of innocent blood, infused by such massacres as the Newtown tragedy at a local level, and casualties from the myriad of conflicts around the world— the list is long. The unarmed, the outgunned, the innocent—who keeps track of them?

The Bible mentions “innocent blood” in some form at least 25 times, everything from an overall admonition against shedding it, to specific instances that God intervened to avenge it. Hands that spill innocent blood make the top seven list of things God hates. The spilling of innocent blood, no matter the scale, no matter the reason, is something heaven monitors expressly. “Shall I leave their innocent blood unavenged? No, I will not” (Joel 3:21, NIV).*

When Cain murdered his brother Abel just outside the gates of Eden, it became very clear, very soon, that his rash act did not escape God’s notice, “What have you done?” God called out to Cain. “The voice of your brother’s blood cries out to Me from the not to be shed in the land that God had given Israel, and if it was, it was purged or “atoned” for by executing swift judgment upon the murderer (Exodus 2:12, 14).

The wisdom of the proverbs warned, “If they say, ‘Come with us, let us lie in wait to shed blood; let us lurk secretly for the innocent without cause.’ . . . My son, do not walk in the way with them, keep your foot from their path; for their feet run to evil, and they make haste to shed blood” (Proverbs 1:11-16).

God alone created life, and His people were created in His image, reminded Marshall Hatch, pastor of the New Mount Pilgrim Missionary Baptist Church in Chicago, Illinois. “To kill or murder extinguishes the image of God. It defaces the image of God.” And, as Proverbs promised, the effects would come back upon the community:

“They would have none of my counsel and despised my every rebuke. Therefore, they shall eat the fruit of their own way, and be filled to the full with their own fancies” (Proverbs 1:30, 31).

Nothing has changed since then, and the text has a decidedly modern tone. The description of those who lie in wait for the innocent has not changed; killing out of greed, for sport, curiosity, or publicity is a familiar story, even now. And so are the destabilizing effects of murder, violence, and the shedding of innocent blood. According to the World Health Organization, homicide, particularly of youth, adds to the global count in premature deaths, and has serious, long-term effects on social and psychological functioning. The overall health, welfare, and economic soundness of a society is at risk because of violence, homicides, and the spilling of innocent blood. Children who witness violence can develop post-traumatic stress disorder and may become increasingly violent themselves as they, and their parents, are increasingly distressed at the crimes they have observed (National Center for Children Exposed to Violence). “It creates a distrust

factor,” said James White, pastor of the Linwood Boulevard Seventh-day Adventist Temple in Kansas City, Missouri. Just blocks from his church, city groups gathered last summer for a grave commemoration: one decade, 1,147 homicide deaths. “It weakens and saddens us. It puts fear in us.”

What to do With Blood guilt

In Chicago, where the homicide rate topped 500 in 2012, most people sense the despair of godlessness in their community and the disrespect for human life, said Chicago’s Pastor Hatch.

“People don’t do well without God,” Hatch said, but through his ministry he tries to find a way to mitigate the environment of violence. That involves creating what he calls an oasis in the city. His and other churches provide relief through a comprehensive approach: free meals to address hunger, youth programs to provide structure and supervision, youth mentoring and jobs that create dignity and respect, school-based counseling that addresses scars and grief left by loss, and of course, anti violence education that gives people the tools they need to resolve conflict.

The Bible says, “Blessed are the peacemakers,” said Hatch. “Peace has to be made.”

“Bloodguilt” was thought to be so serious that it could not be forgiven in ancient Israel. No one wanted to be responsible for spilling innocent blood. The sailors that tossed Jonah overboard prayed that God would not hold them responsible. The apostle Paul left town after a particularly unresponsive crowd rejected his message, saying, “I am innocent of the blood of all men” (Acts 20:26). Judas hung himself because he knew, as did Pilate, that he had betrayed innocent blood. Yes, people knew then that Someone was keeping track of the innocent blood shed.

The blessing for God’s people, ultimately, is that even this could be cured through the power of Christ. Ironically, it is through His own innocent blood that our own blood guiltiness is atoned for. His blood purges even this stubborn guilt. “I will acquit them of the guilt of bloodshed, whom I had not acquitted.”