

Capital Punishment

What Does the Bible Teach on this Vital Subject?

1) Instituted by God Himself

Capital punishment was instituted by God Himself after the worldwide flood. We learn of this in Genesis 9:6--"Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed: for in the image of God made he man." This verse speaks of a murderer, one who knowingly and violently sheds another man's blood, resulting in death. God here gives **man** the authority and the right and the duty to **put to death** the murderer: "**by man** shall his blood be shed." The reason given for this is based upon the value and sacredness of human life: "for in the image of God made he man." In this case we have justice being carried out according to the rule: "life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth" (Exodus 21:23-24). The penalty should fit the crime. In this case the crime is murder and the penalty is death. Notice that Genesis 9:6 was given to man even before the law of Moses was given.

2) "Thou Shalt Not Kill"?

Capital punishment is not a violation of the sixth commandment which says, "Thou shalt not kill" (Exodus 20:13). The proper translation of this verb is "Thou shalt not **murder**." See modern translations (such as the NASB, the NIV and the NKJV) and also see Matthew 19:18 in the KJV. All murder is killing but not all killing is murder. Some examples of killing that would not be considered as murder are as follows: a) killing the enemy in war (Bible examples: David killing Goliath, Joshua and the Israelites when they conquered the land); b) a husband, discovering a man about to kill his wife and/or children, protects and defends his family by having to kill the attacker; c) a policeman who kills in the line of duty in order to protect innocent life; d) the person carrying out capital punishment, such as the man who must pull the switch for the electric chair; e) accidental killing, when the killer never intended to take someone's life. We should also note that the Lord Jesus Christ Himself will "judge and make war" at His second coming resulting in countless numbers of deaths (Rev. 19:11-20).

3) Crimes Punishable By Death

We are assured that capital punishment is not a violation of the 10 Commandments. This is evident when one studies the chapter which immediately follows the ten commandments: Exodus chapter 21 (the 10 Commandments are found in chapter 20). In chapter 21 we learn that God in His law demanded the death penalty for a number of crimes such as murder, kidnapping, cursing parents, etc. See Exodus 21:12,15,16,17. See also Leviticus 20:10-17 for other crimes punishable by death in the law of Moses.

4) The Executioner As God's Servant

In New Testament times we find that capital punishment was still being practiced. In Romans 13:4 we learn that God has given human governments the authority to execute wrath upon evildoers by means of a sword (a common instrument of capital punishment in New Testament days). The Apostle Paul was living in a day when capital punishment was commonly practiced in the Roman empire (quite unlike our day), and yet he does not condemn this practice. On the contrary he describes the person who bears the sword as being God's servant. Thus the one punishing the person who does evil does so in the exercise of God's delegated authority.

5) An Effective Deterrent

Capital punishment, when consistently practiced, is a very effective deterrent to crime. This is because the fear of death is the greatest fear that man has (see Hebrews 2:14-15). Because death is the king of fears, a man will think twice about committing a crime if he knows it will cost him his life. He will be much less reluctant to murder someone if he knows that the worst that could happen to him is to stay in jail the rest of his life with meals provided, television to watch, etc. When swift justice is carried out then "those who remain shall hear, and fear, and shall henceforth commit no more any such evil" (Deut.19:20). When the right penalty is not executed speedily, then this is an encouragement to crime (see Eccles. 8:11).

6) Cruel and Inhumane?

Isn't capital punishment very cruel and inhumane? Death is usually not pleasant to witness, and certainly those responsible for putting a criminal to death do not have an

envious task. Nevertheless we need to be careful that we do not focus on the criminal and forget about the victim of the crime. Cold-blooded murder is very cruel and inhumane. Forcible rape is very cruel and inhumane. Hijacking an airplane and endangering the lives of many innocent people is very cruel and inhumane. Pushing life-destroying drugs is very cruel and inhumane. In our zeal to protect the criminal we have lost sight of the terribleness of the crime. Regardless of a person's position on capital punishment, all would have to agree that if a murderer is put to death, he will never murder again. It is remarkable that those people who decry capital punishment as being a cruel and inhumane method of destroying people's lives are often the same people who are strongly in favor of abortion rights. Why does a guilty murderer have a greater right to life than an unborn child?

7) Paul's Own Testimony

What did the Apostle Paul think of capital punishment? Did he consider it to be unfair and cruel and inhumane? We have already considered Paul's teaching in Romans 13, but we should also make note of what the Apostle said in Acts 25:11: "If I be an offender, or have committed any thing worthy of death, I refuse not to die." Paul knew that there were certain crimes that were worthy of death, and he knew that those guilty of such crimes must be executed. If he was guilty of such, then he would not refuse to die. He would submit to capital punishment if he had done deeds worthy of such. Of course, Paul was innocent of any such crimes, and yet he was eventually executed under Nero. For what crime? For preaching the gospel of the grace of God!

8) Bright Barbarians

Even uncultured men know deep down in their hearts that certain crimes demand the death penalty. This is illustrated in Acts 28 when Paul was shipwrecked upon the island of Melita (Malta) where he met a group of kindly barbarians (v.1-2). As Paul was gathering sticks for the fire, a deadly venomous snake bit him on the hand. Normally such a bite would be fatal in a matter of minutes. When the natives saw this they said, "No doubt this man is a murderer, whom, though he hath escaped the sea, yet justice alloweth not to live" (v.4). These natives saw what they thought was the penalty (death) and thus they assumed the crime (he must be a murderer). They soon learned that they were mistaken, but the point is that these barbarians had a built in sense of justice and they knew that murderers should pay for their crime by death.

9) The Testimony of a Thief (Robber)

In Luke chapter 23 we have the honest testimony of a man who was being put to death for crimes he had done. This was capital punishment by means of Roman crucifixion. This man was an evildoer, he was arrested, and he was found guilty of crimes worthy of death. Modern methods of execution are generally very mild and painless as compared to Roman crucifixion. What did this man think of capital punishment? Was he opposed to it? Did he consider it to be cruel and inhumane? Did he think it to be unfair and unjust? Here is his testimony (his words to the other condemned criminal): "Dost thou not fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? And we indeed **justly**; for we receive the due reward of our deeds" (Luke 23:40-41). In other

words, he was saying, "We are getting exactly what we deserve: death by crucifixion. What we have done is worthy of death!" Before men and before human government most of us are not guilty of crimes worthy of death. However, before a Holy God every one of us needs to recognize that we have done certain things that are worthy of death (see Romans 1:29-32; 6:23a). As the Old Testament says, "The soul that sinneth, it shall die" (Ezekiel 18:4). How thankful we should be that our Lord Jesus Christ suffered the death penalty for us: "But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8).

10) The Death of an Innocent Man

If capital punishment is practiced, would not there be times when an innocent man is pronounced guilty and put to death? Yes, this is true. Our judicial system is far from perfect and there are times when the guilty are justified and the innocent are condemned (compare Deut. 25:1). Even without the death penalty, it is true that occasionally some innocent men are sent to prison even for life. We must remember that there is in heaven a true and righteous Judge who sees all and who knows all and who someday will make right all that is wrong and will straighten out all that is crooked. In eternity, all will be corrected (see Luke 16:25 for an example of this). The greatest example of an innocent man being put to death is that of the Lord Jesus Himself, "who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth" (1 Pet. 2:22). The only sinless Man who ever lived was condemned to death by crucifixion! As we think about Christ's death, we must remember that it was **for our sins** that He suffered and bled and died (1 Cor. 15:3; Rom. 5:8). "For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the

Just (the Righteous One) for the unjust (the unrighteous ones), that he might bring us to God" (1 Pet. 3:18). We are the guilty ones who deserved the death penalty (Rom. 6:23), but Jesus paid it all! He died so that we might live (John 5:24)!

The Middletown Bible Church

349 East Street
Middletown, CT 06457
(860) 346-0907

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