

Capital Punishment—the Death Penalty

In Genesis 8:21, Yahweh promises to never “again strike down every living creature as I have done.” After such a gracious promise, Yahweh institutes a change in judicial (the part of government responsible for justice) punishment for all of humanity. The death penalty is called “capital punishment” because it is the ultimate punishment—you lose your life. God’s plan for mitigating violence on the earth is those who take life lose their own. They are humanely put to death.

The language in Genesis 9:5 is not easily understood, and if you are not careful, you will run right over it as you read the chapter. The CSB translation helps clarify precisely what the Hebrew is saying with this sentence. “If someone murders a fellow human, I [God] will require that person’s life” (Gen 9:5b). Then verse 6 states why whoever murders someone must also lose their own life. “Whoever sheds human blood, by humans his blood will be shed, for God made humans in his image” is God’s explanation of why the death penalty is now the law of the earth. Humans are different and set apart—they, male and female, are made in God’s image. Humans are not animals. Animals kill animals—that is just the reality of nature. Human life is sacred.

This is a new mandate for all of humanity. Remember, God has not communicated the Ten Commandments to Israel by this time. Let’s read verse 5 in its entirety:

**And for your lifeblood, I will require a reckoning:
from every beast I will require it and from man.
From his fellow man, I will require a reckoning for the life of man.**

The blood is the source of life. The shedding of blood is the death of a person; it is not describing bleeding. Human life is so set apart, so sacred, that if an animal kills a human, the animal must be put to death. And the same thing holds for a fellow man. If a man kills a man, God will require a reckoning. What is a reckoning? It is accountability. God now commands governing authorities to hold individuals accountable when the life of a human is taken from them.

Should a person be able to intentionally and willfully take an innocent life and remain alive?
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Leviticus 24:17 answers the question. “Whoever takes a human life shall surely be put to death.” Exodus 21:23–25 communicates the same idea with greater specificity. “But if there is harm, then you shall pay life for life, ²⁴eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, ²⁵burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.” God is pro-life! The impartial and consistent application of an “eye for eye” and “life for life” is supposed to deter the shedding of innocent life. In Ezekiel 13, we read about God’s indictment of Israel’s failed justice system. Yahweh condemns Israel for “putting to death souls who should not die and keeping alive souls who should not live.”

The apostle Paul reinforces this in Romans 13. He writes the governing authorities do not bear the sword in vain (v. 4). But what does that mean? A person’s life is ended with a sword. The governing authorities do not carry a sword for no reason. When the government fails to put to death those guilty of murder, they are bearing the sword in vain. The person who loses his life for murdering someone else can never take another life.

In the United States, 23 states do not have the death penalty. In those states, the punishment is often, but not always, life in prison. Americans and Christians are divided in their support of capital punishment. There are several reasons why even Christians struggle with supporting the death penalty. The first is sometimes juries (judges) convict innocent men of murder. In those cases, an innocent person could be put to death wrongfully. Second, many Christians oppose it because of the sanctity of the life of the guilty person. Other reasons for opposition are the death penalty does not deter violent crimes and does not deal with the root causes of social injustices like poverty.

Christians are not enthusiastically pro-death penalty. Their support of the death penalty is rooted in support for the sanctity of innocent lives, the desire to deter violent crimes, and obedience to the word of God. A deep dive into the Bible and capital punishment reveals the mandate from God before the Mosaic Law (Gen 9), the Law of Moses, and the New Testament all supporting the death penalty.