

What the Bible Says About

# CAPITAL PUNISHMENT

Defined: Webster - **a:** punishable by death (a ~ crime) **b:** involving execution (~ punishment)

Purpose of Government: Government is God-ordained (Rom. 13:1).<sup>1</sup>

It can be summed up in one word: Justice.

"Government's role is the *protection* of the *rights* of the great mass of law-abiding citizens. Governments task is to insure justice for these by restraining evildoers who would violate their rights.

"We should note that government's job is to *protect* our rights, not to *provide* everything we have a right to. Our basic right is the right to live a godly life in peace, unhindered and unthreatened, free from the fear of evildoers"<sup>2</sup>

Philosophical Considerations:

How do we respond to the criminal? Rehabilitation, curing an illness or just deserts?

C.S. Lewis stated: "We may very properly ask whether it is likely to deter others and to reform the criminal. But neither of these two last questions is a question about justice. There is no sense in talking about a 'just deterrent' or a 'just cure'. We demand of a deterrent not whether it is just but whether it will deter. We demand of a cure not whether it is just but whether it succeeds. Thus when we cease to consider what the criminal deserves and consider only what will cure him or deter others, we have tacitly removed him from the sphere of justice altogether; instead of a person, a subject of rights, we now have a mere object, a patient, a 'case'.<sup>3</sup>

Capital Punishment in the Scriptures:

Capital Punishment in the Old Testament:

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<sup>1</sup> All Scripture used is from the *New American Standard Bible*.

<sup>2</sup> *Tough Questions - Biblical Answers part two*, Jack Cottrell; p. 20

<sup>3</sup> *God in the Dock*, C. S. Lewis; in an essay called *The Humanitarian Theory of Punishment*, p. 288

Capital Punishment was to be enforced in cases of:

1. Murder - Ex. 21:12-14; Num. 35:30
2. Kidnapping - Ex. 21:16; Deut. 24:7
3. Adultery - Lev. 20:10; Deut. 22:22-24
4. Incest - Lev. 20:11, 12, 14
5. Homosexual Acts - Lev. 20:13
6. Striking or Cursing a parent - Ex. 21:15, 17
7. Rebelling against parents - Deut. 21:18-21
8. Witchcraft or Spiritism - Ex. 22:18; Lev. 20:27
9. Cursing God - Lev. 24:10-16
10. Trying to lead people to serve false gods - Deut. 13:1-11; 18:20

"In all these cases and more, God declared that the punishment should be death, and He expected this punishment to be carried out under the supervision of the local authorities. This shows that capital punishment is not inherently wrong, and it shows that civil government is the divinely authorized means for carrying it out."<sup>4</sup>

Capital Punishment and the New Testament:

*Romans 13:1-7 Let every person be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. Therefore he who resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves. For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same; for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath upon the one who practices evil. Wherefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for conscience' sake. For because of this you also pay taxes, for rulers are servants of God, devoting themselves to this very thing. Render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor.*

*I Peter 2:13-14 Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority, or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right.*

*I Timothy 2:1-4 First of all, then, I urge that entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings, be made on behalf of all men, for kings and all who are in authority, in order that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity. This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.*

Arguments Against Capital Punishment:

**OBJECTION!** It is not a deterrent.

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<sup>4</sup> Cottrell, p. 56

Answer: The deterrent aspect of Capital Punishment is secondary. CP is just. Also, it would be a better deterrent if punishment were swift with less technicalities for stalling the sentence.

**OBJECTION!** It costs more to execute a prisoner than to house them for life.

Answer: This is true only under our present system which allows seemingly endless appeals.

**OBJECTION!** How can a person be against the death of infants (abortion) and be for capital punishment?

Answer: It goes back to the question of justice and the sanctity of life. An unborn child has done nothing wrong. It is not just kill him for any reason. A murderer has taken another's' life. Because the life that was taken has such high value, justice demands the life of the guilty for punishment.

**OBJECTION!** Jesus abolished the Old Law. We now live under grace.

Answer: Matthew 5:17 "Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill."

**OBJECTION!** What if you execute an innocent man?

Answer: "The risk of error in determining guilt or innocence appears to receive exaggerated attention. An innocent man's death due to error on the part of a judge, attorney, or jury - an extremely rare event in recent years - is of far less danger for a people than setting at liberty criminals found guilty of capital crimes. Our land is not clean, because many such people walk our streets. Are we wiser than God? Let us reevaluate our notions of justice and heed the wisdom of God."<sup>5</sup>

Conclusion:

"Have we the right to claim another man's life as penalty for crimes he has committed? One individual, nor as a mob, nor other self-appointed group, however high principled, has the right to take another man's life; yet if asked whether capital punishment violates the sixth commandment, one must reply, "No!" The same law of Moses which prohibits murder, not twenty-five verses later (compare Exodus 20:13 and 21:12), requires that "he that smiteth a man, so that he dieth, shall surely be put to death."

"No, we do not have a personal right to claim another's life. But the legal, responsible, duly authorized courts of our land have the divine right and responsibility to claim a man's life for a capital crime."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Christian Standard, *What About Capital Punishment?*; Daniel J. Donaldson, Nov. 13, 1977. p. 5

<sup>6</sup>ibid.