



Biblical Ethics:

Selected Resources from the ESV Study Bible

The End of Life, Euthanasia, and Capital Punishment

The Origin of Death

God did not originally create human beings to be subject to death, but “sin came into the world through one man, and *death through sin*, and so death spread to all men because all sinned” ([Rom. 5:12](#)). This refers to the sin of Adam recorded in [Genesis 3](#).

God had previously instructed Adam, “of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die” ([Gen. 2:17](#)). Therefore when Adam and Eve sinned, they immediately experienced *spiritual “death,”* that is, a separation from God. In addition, the just sentence of *physical death* began to be gradually imposed on them in that they experienced aging, leading eventually to death. God told Adam, “By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return” ([Gen. 3:19](#)). Since the time of Adam, all human beings have been subject to aging and inevitable physical death (except Enoch in [Gen. 5:24](#); cf. [Heb. 11:5](#); and Elijah in [2 Kings 2:11–12](#)).

Why Do Christians Die?

Although Christians have been forgiven of their sins and are no longer under sentence to suffer the penalty of death for those sins ([Rom. 6:23](#); [8:1](#); [1 Cor. 15:3](#)), they are still subject to physical death because God has not yet applied to their lives all of the benefits that were earned by Christ for his people. In fact, Paul says that death will be the “last enemy to be destroyed” ([1 Cor. 15:26](#)). For this reason, believers today, living in a fallen world, are still subject to aging and death.

Yet death does not come to believers because God is punishing them, for, “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” ([Rom. 8:1](#)). Rather, death is the final outcome of living in a fallen world. Just as Christians are not kept from all sicknesses, floods, and earthquakes, etc., and just as the agricultural fields of Christians still grow as many weeds as the fields of non-Christians, so Christians will experience death as well.

However, Christians should have confidence that God will use even the experience of final illness and death as one of those events that “work together for good” for those who “love God and are called according to his purpose” ([Rom. 8:28](#)). Jesus Christ, who himself experienced physical death as a human being, often seems particularly near to Christians as they die, for they “suffer with him” ([Rom. 8:17](#); cf. [Phil. 3:10](#); [1 Pet. 4:13](#)). Paul hoped to honor Christ in his death as he had in his life: “it is my eager expectation and hope that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death” ([Phil. 1:20](#)). The risen Lord Jesus encouraged Christians in Smyrna, “Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life” ([Rev. 2:10](#); cf. [Heb. 11:35](#); [Rev. 12:11](#)).

What Happens When People Die?

When Christians die, their physical bodies are buried in the earth, but their spirits (or souls) go immediately into the Lord’s presence in heaven. Paul said, “My desire is to depart *and be with Christ*” ([Phil. 1:23](#)), and “we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord” ([2 Cor. 5:8](#)). When Stephen was dying, he cried out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit” ([Acts 7:59](#); cf. [Gen. 35:18](#); [Eccles. 12:7](#); [Luke 23:43](#); [Heb. 12:23](#); [Rev.](#)

6:9). Then at Christ's second coming, when he returns to the earth, believers' bodies will be raised from the dead, made perfect, and reunited with their spirits ([1 Cor. 15:23, 51–52](#); [1 Thess. 4:16–17](#)).

When unbelievers die, their bodies also are buried in the earth, but their spirits go immediately to experience separation from God and punishment for their sins. "It is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment" ([Heb. 9:27](#); cf. [Luke 16:24–26](#); see also notes on [1 Pet. 3:18](#); [4:6](#)).

Funerals and Burial

It is not wrong for Christians to grieve deeply over the loss of fellowship with those who have died, even if the deceased were believers and there is great confidence that they are with the Lord in heaven. Grief at loss of any sort is natural. Although the apostles themselves were present in the early church in Jerusalem, and the believers in Jerusalem were sure that Stephen was in heaven with Christ (cf. [Acts 7:59](#)), they still expressed profound grief: "Devout men buried Stephen *and made great lamentation over him*" ([Acts 8:2](#)). Although Jesus knew he would raise Lazarus from the dead, when he came to the tomb of Lazarus, "Jesus wept" ([John 11:35](#)). These examples indicate that it is right and proper to grieve at the death of a Christian loved one. But Christians should not "grieve as others do who have no hope" ([1 Thess. 4:13](#)), that is, their grief should not be the grief of despair, but grief mixed with joy and hope for future reunion (see [1 Cor. 15:55–57](#); [Rev. 14:13](#)).

When unbelievers die, if there has been no indication of saving faith in the person's life, it would not be right to give the person's loved ones assurance that the one who has died is in heaven. But it is still right to recall and speak of pleasant memories, and to remember the good things that the person did in his or her lifetime, much as David did after hearing that Saul had died (see [2 Sam. 1:19–25](#)).

The Bible does not give any direct commands about how to treat the body of a person who has died, but there are recurring instances in Scripture of treating a person's body with dignity and respect, up to and including the time of burial (cf. [1 Sam. 31:11–12](#); [1 Kings 13:29–30](#); [Mark 6:29](#); [Luke 23:56](#); [John 19:38–42](#)). This can be done in a variety of ways according to what is understood in each culture as signifying respect and honor to the memory of the person who has died.

Regarding cremation, Christians have held differing views. Some object that cremation (which entails destroying the physical body) undermines the expectation of a future resurrection of the body when Christ returns. (When Jesus rose from the dead, it was his same body that was raised and made perfect, and so it will be with Christian believers; see [1 Cor. 15:35–45](#).) Others, however, think cremation is sometimes the wisest choice, perhaps for economic reasons, because burial land is scarce, or for other reasons. The body is eventually going to die and disintegrate in any case, and God will raise it from the dead and re-create it in its more perfect condition (i.e., in its glorified prime), no matter how scattered it is. If cremation is chosen for a Christian who has died, care should be taken to make clear that the family still should expect a future resurrection of the very same body that has died and now returns "to dust" ([Gen. 3:19](#)). But many Christians still prefer a simple and dignified burial of the person's body in the ground, in part because this gives a clear picture of awaiting the resurrection on the day Christ returns.

Euthanasia

The sixth commandment, "You shall not murder" ([Ex. 20:13](#)), prohibits any act that would intentionally, or through carelessness, take the life of another human being (see note on [Deut. 5:17](#); the exceptions of capital punishment, killing in war, and self-defense are not in view here, nor are they implied by the meaning of the Hebrew terminology in the passage). The expression most frequently used for violating the sixth commandment is "shedding innocent blood" (cf. [Ex. 23:7](#); [Deut. 19:10, 13](#); [Ps. 10:8](#); [Prov. 6:17](#)).

This prohibition against murder applies to all human beings, including: the elderly, those who are terminally ill, and those who wish to die. Intentionally taking the life of any of these people would break the

commandment, “You shall not murder” (cf. also [2 Sam. 1:10, 14–15](#)). Nations that have allowed for physician-assisted suicide find that a society can quickly move from merely *allowing* “the right to die” to the belief that there is “an *obligation* to die” on the part of the elderly and the very ill people who are “draining resources” from the society. In such situations it becomes likely that a number of elderly people will be put to death against their will.

It is important, however, to maintain a clear distinction between *killing a person* and *letting someone die*. Killing in the wrongful sense of murder, as prohibited in [Exodus 20:13](#), means actively doing something to a patient that hastens or causes his or her death. But “letting someone die” means allowing someone to die without interfering with the process that is already taking place. In cases where it is clearly known to be the patient’s wish to be allowed to die, and when there is no reasonable human hope of recovery, and where death seems imminent—then it does not seem wrong to allow such a person to die, rather than either to initiate an artificial life support system or to prolong the natural dying process by artificial means. For such situations, nothing in Scripture would prohibit a dying person from praying for God to take his life. On the other hand, where there is a reasonable human hope of recovery, and where there is a realistic, practical ability to help, the obligation to “love your neighbor as yourself” ([Matt. 22:39](#)) implies that active measures should be taken to save the person’s life. In the parable of the good Samaritan, Jesus indicated that the priest and the Levite were both wrong for neglecting to do what could be done to save a badly injured man, who with care was able to recover ([Luke 10:30–37](#)).

The hardest end-of-life decisions are often related to removing a dying patient from artificial life support, which can involve various measures from an artificial lung to simply providing artificial hydration and nutrition. Christians hold different positions over exactly when in such cases the moral line is crossed from *letting someone die* to *killing*. When considering the proper course of action, Christians should remember that while death is an enemy to resist ([1 Cor. 15:26](#)), natural mortality is still part of living in a fallen world (cf. [Gen. 2:17](#); [Rom. 5:12](#); [Heb. 9:27](#)). There is therefore nothing wrong with accepting natural mortality by removing a dying patient from artificial means that are only slowing the natural death process.

There are more complex cases where medication given to alleviate a patient’s pain may also have a secondary effect of hastening a person’s death. In such cases, some Christian ethicists say that the two most important considerations are: (1) the primary purpose for giving the medication and (2) the patient’s own wishes regarding the alleviation of pain. Other Christian ethicists claim that, in such cases, the moral value of improving life quality is always less than the moral value of honoring the sanctity of human life, and, while doing what they can to alleviate pain, Christians should never give higher priority to improving the quality of life (reducing pain) over honoring the sanctity of life (not killing a person).

Wherever possible, it is both wise and loving for people who are still in good health to complete the appropriate legal and medical forms to make known their wishes regarding medical care at the end of life. These decisions should also be verbally communicated to those who will likely have to make end-of-life decisions about each person.

Suicide

Suicide is murder of oneself, and it is prohibited by the command, “You shall not murder” ([Ex. 20:13](#)). It is a serious sin against God and brings immense, lifelong grief to loved ones who are left, but the Bible nowhere teaches that suicide is a unique and unforgivable sin that prevents a person who has lived by faith in Christ from being saved.

Christ's Victory over Death

Finally, Christians need have no fear of death: "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" The verse continues, "The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" ([1 Cor. 15:55–57](#)).

Capital Punishment

The Bible places much importance on the sanctity of human life; therefore any theological argument for capital punishment—the legal execution of someone guilty of a heinous crime—must meet high standards of biblical support and practical justice. Since human beings are made in God's image and likeness, only God has the ultimate authority to specify if, and under what conditions, it is morally justified to take a human life.

The Covenant with Noah

After the flood, God commanded Noah and his children to be fruitful, to multiply, and to have dominion and stewardship over the earth and all of its creatures. Permission was given to kill animals for food ([Gen. 9:3](#)); but murdering a human being meant forfeiting one's own life, for God said, "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image" ([Gen. 9:5–6](#)). In this verse, "shedding blood" refers to the violent, unjustified taking of human life (cf. [Gen. 37:22](#); [Num. 35:33](#); [1 Kings 2:31](#); [Ezek. 22:4](#)).

This part of God's covenant with Noah ([Gen. 9:1–17](#)) is a crucial text related to capital punishment for two reasons: (1) the provisions of this covenant were not limited to one specific nation for one specific period of time, as the Mosaic laws were, but were given at the time of a new beginning for all of human society following the flood; and (2) the reason for the command regarding murder is one that remains perpetually valid: "for God made man in his own image" ([Gen. 9:6](#)). The previous verse indicates that this command shows how God will execute justice on a murderer, namely, by requiring that other human beings, as God's representatives, put the murderer to death: "From his fellow man I will require a reckoning for the life of man" ([Gen. 9:5](#)).

This passage in Genesis explains what is wrong with murdering a human being and why the punishment for intentional murder should be execution: because human beings are made in the image of God. The severity of the crime dictates the severity of the punishment. This is consistent with an overarching principle known as *lex talionis* (i.e., the law of retribution). [Exodus 21:22–25](#) (see [note](#)) is one example: "if there is harm, then you shall pay life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe." In contrast to the malicious practices of the nations surrounding God's people, the *lex talionis* was a civilizing influence in three ways (cf. [Gen. 4:23–24](#)). First, it prevented private vengeance, since the context of such laws showed that this was a principle reserved for judges. Second, it prevented excessive punishment by insuring that *only* an eye could be taken for damaging an eye. (For example, one could not *kill* another in return for blinding him.) Third, it prevented insufficient punishment by ensuring that social prejudice did not lead to treating some lives as less valuable than others. One could not require an eye for damaging an eye in one case but not another.

In biblical moral understanding, equally shared reflection of the divine image is what demands taking the life of the one who has wrongly taken the life of another. But the Bible never requires more than the life of the murderer; e.g., it never allows killing a whole village to avenge the murder of one person. According to the Bible, the value of human life does not come from anything that human beings control. It comes from reflecting something (or someone) other than themselves; it is something that all possess and that they can never lose.

Some interpreters disagree with this view. They argue that [Genesis 9:6](#) does not *prescribe* capital punishment but merely *describes* what often results from living a life of violence. They claim that the statement "Whoever

sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed” is only a prediction equivalent to the saying “all who take the sword will perish by the sword” ([Matt. 26:52](#)). Against this interpretation is (1) the fact that [Genesis 9:5](#) says *God himself* will require this “reckoning” for the taking of human life; (2) the reason given for taking human life is not to satisfy a subjective feeling but is rather to hold perpetrators accountable for destroying God’s “own image”; and (3) subsequent laws show that God in fact commanded that human beings carry out the death penalty for various crimes (cf. [Num. 35:16–21](#)).

Many who oppose the death penalty subscribe to the so-called “seamless garment” argument. For them, the sanctity of human life means that killing another human being is never permissible, whether in abortion, euthanasia, capital punishment, or war. Those who support the death penalty respond that specific teachings of the Bible, not an abstract theory (such as “never take a human life”), should determine the Christian position. And specific teachings of the Bible do give support to the principle of capital punishment. One of the strongest biblical refutations of the “seamless garment” theory is in [Ezekiel 13:19](#) where God not only condemns “putting to death souls who should not die” but also “keeping alive souls who should not live.” Someone who is “pro-life” on abortion and euthanasia can, therefore, at the same time consistently favor capital punishment. The principle remains the same in both cases: justice for and protection of the innocent, and punishment for the guilty in proportion to what they have done.

The Sixth Commandment

The sixth of the Ten Commandments forbids the unjustified taking of a person’s life: “You shall not murder” ([Ex. 20:13](#)). The ESV footnote to this verse explains that the Hebrew term used (*ratsakh*) is somewhat broader than the contemporary English word “murder” when it says, “The Hebrew word also covers causing human death through carelessness or negligence.” The commandment does not, however, prohibit all killing. The verb *ratsakh* is never used, e.g., for killing in war. Another reason the sixth commandment cannot prohibit capital punishment is that God himself said in the very next chapter of Exodus that “if a man willfully attacks another to kill him by cunning, you shall take him from my altar, that he may die” ([Ex. 21:14](#)). (However, cities of refuge were established for those guilty of accidental [unintentional] manslaughter [[Ex. 21:13](#); cf. [Joshua 20](#)].)

In the OT it was God who prescribed the death penalty. Therefore capital punishment cannot be contrary to God’s character or inconsistent with God’s command to “love your neighbor as yourself” ([Lev. 19:18](#)). God’s laws are always consistent with his moral character, and his moral character never changes ([Ps. 102:27](#); [Mal. 3:6](#); [Heb. 13:8](#); [James 1:17](#)).

The laws God gave Moses at Sinai for governing Israel in the Promised Land included death penalties for several other crimes besides the intentional shedding of innocent human blood, which had already been prohibited under the Noahic covenant ([Gen. 9:5–6](#)). But these additional death penalties were *only* given to govern the theocracy of Israel and were never universally applied even in the OT. While the death penalty for murder is universally commanded based on an enduring theological principle (i.e., man being made in the image of God; [Gen. 9:5–6](#)), the other death penalties later included in the Mosaic law are not. Therefore these laws were specific to the particular history of Israel at that time, and they should not be treated as necessary patterns for civil governments today. (For many of these cases regarding worship of other gods, the NT parallel would be excommunication from the fellowship of the church.)

Methods of execution in the OT included stoning ([Lev. 20:2, 27; 24:14; Deut. 21:21](#)), hanging ([Deut. 21:22–23; Josh. 8:29](#)), burning ([Lev. 20:14; 21:9](#)), and the sword ([Ex. 32:27–28](#)). OT law also ensured that capital punishment could only be carried out based on the testimony of at least two witnesses ([Num. 35:30; Deut. 17:6, 19](#)). In some cases, the punishment was to be executed by the witnesses themselves ([Deut. 13:6–10; 17:7](#)), while in others it was to be inflicted by the congregation ([Num. 15:32–36](#)), the nearest of kin, or the avenger of blood ([Deut. 19:11–12](#)).

The New Testament on Capital Punishment

The most definitive NT text on capital punishment is [Romans 13](#), where the apostle Paul discusses the nature of punishment and the role of civil magistrates. He writes, “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. ... Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer” ([Rom. 13:1–4](#)). It is important to recall, however, that just three verses earlier Paul forbids personal revenge: “Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord’” ([Rom. 12:19](#)). Then in [Romans 13](#), with no sense of inconsistency, Paul moves right on to explain that leaving punishment “to the wrath of God” means allowing punishment to come through the civil government, which is “the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer” ([13:4](#)). So, while personal retaliation is forbidden, civil authorities are to punish evildoers justly and dispassionately.

Both proponents and opponents of capital punishment point to “the sword” (Gk. *machaira*) in [Romans 13:4](#) to support their view. Opponents note that “the sword” is sometimes used as a symbol or metaphor (i.e., the “sword of the Spirit,” [Eph. 6:17](#); the word of God is “sharper than any two-edged sword,” [Heb. 4:12](#)). They understand “the sword” in [Romans 13:4](#) to be only a symbol of governing authorities. Against this, proponents of capital punishment maintain that the image of “the sword” stands for governmental authority to use even lethal force if necessary. They note that even where “the sword” symbolizes authority, that symbol has no meaning without the reality backing it up. The NT also uses the same word for sword (Gk. *machaira*) on several occasions that clearly refer to the real use of lethal force, e.g., when Herod “killed James the brother of John with the sword” ([Acts 12:2](#)), and when it refers to martyrs who were “killed with the sword” ([Heb. 11:37](#); cf. also [Matt. 26:52](#); [Acts 16:27](#); [Rom. 8:35](#); [Rev. 13:10](#)).

The apostle Paul, who used the word “sword” in this text, showed that he knew that some crimes are worthy of death, saying, “If ... I ... have committed anything for which I deserve to die, I do not seek to escape death” ([Acts 25:11](#)). It is unlikely that Paul would have said this if he thought capital punishment was never justifiable. Even so, except for crimes of murder, neither God’s command to Noah in [Genesis 9:6](#) nor any NT statement makes it necessary to treat any other specific crime as so horrible that all societies everywhere must always apply capital punishment when someone commits it. Apparently that question is left for each society or government to seek to decide wisely and justly.

The two sides on the issue of capital punishment also differ over Jesus’ command to turn the other cheek ([Matt. 5:38–39](#)). Proponents of capital punishment think that Jesus only addressed personal conduct, not how governments carry out assigned duties, while opponents claim that Jesus addressed government duties as well. The story of the woman caught in the act of adultery ([John 7:53–8:11](#)) is not thought to be as relevant by either side, both because there is doubt about whether the text itself was originally part of John’s Gospel (see [note](#)) and because Jesus’ words in the story (“Let him who is without sin ... be the first to throw a stone at her”) do not pertain to the crime of murder.

Justice and the Role of Government

At the heart of the moral debate over capital punishment are often different views of justice and the role that is assigned to government in relation to it. Those favoring capital punishment usually stress the retributive view of justice (i.e., wrongdoing calls for proportional punishment). They argue that the Bible reveals that God has ordained human government to act as his agent in applying retributive justice to wrongdoers. Human government is “an *avenger* who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer” ([Rom. 13:4](#); cf. [1 Pet. 2:14](#)). Thus capital punishment is seen as (1) an outpouring of divine justice in this present life, (2) a deterrent from personal vengeance ([Rom. 12:19](#)), and (3) a deterrent from further crimes (see [Eccles. 8:11](#); [Rom. 13:3–4](#)).

Those opposing capital punishment either define justice differently (e.g., as distributing benefits or restoring damages), or hold that government should be less concerned with retribution (treating people as they deserve) than with mercy (*not* treating people as badly as they deserve).

Finally, Christians who believe that capital punishment has biblical justification also hold that it must be carried out in a just manner. So, among other things, this means that holding people accountable for wrongdoing should be done in a way that requires: (1) clear evidence of guilt established by eyewitnesses or irrefutable forensic evidence (cf. [Num. 35:30](#); [Deut. 17:6, 19](#)); (2) granting the accused due process without discrimination based on social status, beliefs, race, or economic class; (3) rendering judgment based on adequate proof of moral culpability; and (4) making sure that any punishment assigned is proportional to the crime.



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