

Does Scripture Allow For Killing In Self-Defense?

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Among mainstream Christianity, a growing sentiment allows for—or even endorses—Christians taking up weapons for their own defense or the defense of other Christians. Proponents often point to an incident in South Africa, where attackers charged into a church service one Sunday and began shooting and hurling grenades. The hero of the story, a heat-packing "Christian," returned fire with his .38 caliber pistol, killing or wounding a number of the attackers.

Enthusiasts of this story look at it partly with satisfaction that some of the attackers were "taken out" and partly with disappointment that more worshippers were not carrying guns so more could have been "saved." They do not mean "saved by grace through faith" but by a good old-fashioned shoot-out between believers and nonbelievers.

Some Christians even go so far as to declare the Bible a "book of war." They point to God's instructions to the nation of Israel to destroy the idolatrous Canaanites (Numbers 33:50-53, 55), but fail to recognize God's original promise to Israel that *He* would drive out the inhabitants of the land *if* Israel would obey Him (Exodus 23:20-30). They also point to the commands in the Old Testament to kill lawbreakers within the church-state of Israel. (It is ironic that one of the death-penalty crimes is improper Sabbathkeeping, something they would rather overlook!)

Their basic premise is that Christians are perfectly justified in killing in self-defense or in anticipation of a crime. They claim society in general would be much safer if we had a more fully armed citizenry. Statistics *do* indicate this: In a secular nation like the United States, society will be safer with an effective deterrent against violent crime, something the government has not been and may not be able to provide without stripping citizens of many civil liberties.

The question for Christians to ponder is this: Even though we benefit from living in a society where gun ownership is a constitutional right, are we ever justified in intentionally killing another human being? The sixth commandment is very clear: "You shall not murder" (Exodus 20:13). However, what about this seemingly gray area of killing someone to protect our life or property or that of the empirical self (family, church, neighbors, etc.)?

God's Instruction

The children of Israel, before they demanded a king in I Samuel 8:5-8, were both a nation and a religious congregation. The human government that God ordained over Israel had both civil and religious authority. As such, many of Israel's civil laws given by God through Moses are not directly applicable today because we do not live in a church-state with God at the helm and directly bearing on the judicial process. Nonetheless, these laws still show God's intent and will concerning civil matters.

God instructed Israel about what to do when a man was killed. Numbers 35:9-28 shows that God recognizes **only two** classifications of killing: accidental and intentional. "*Self-defense*" is not even listed as a possibility! God illustrates "accidental death" as occurring when there is no intent to kill or to harm. It is accidental when there is no awareness that an action will result in the death of another.

Deuteronomy 19:5 provides a clear example of such an accident: ". . . as when a man goes to the woods with his neighbor to cut timber, and his hand swings a stroke with the ax to cut down the tree, and the head slips from the handle and strikes his neighbor so that he dies."

However, when there is intent to kill or injure, God's law defines it as murder *regardless* of what the other person was threatening to do, about to do, or in the process of doing: "He who strikes a man so that he dies shall surely be put to death" (Exodus 21:12). If a man fires a gun with the foreknowledge that it has the potential to kill another man, it is murder. The "self-defense" category is something afforded by the law of the land, not by the law of God.

Suspension of the Law?

If, as some assert, it is justifiable to break the sixth commandment to protect oneself or one's interests, is it also permissible to break any of the other commandments when threatened? Consider the same question of defense, but substitute any of God's commands for the sixth commandment:

» **First Commandment:** Could we have another god before the true God if it meant protection for our families and properties? For instance, would God look kindly upon us accepting Allah in order to stay alive?

» **Second Commandment:** Can we fall back on idol worship if it will keep us alive? Aaron built the Golden Calf for the Israelites because he feared them more than God (Exodus 32:1-9)—and God was very displeased!

» **Third Commandment:** Can we take on God's name, only to renounce it when trouble comes? Could we diminish the quality of our worship of God if it meant safety and security? Would God be pleased if we ignored His true nature—His character, mind, plans, will, promises—in hope of putting ourselves in a better position?

» **Fourth Commandment:** The seventh-day Sabbath is a weekly reminder of some of God's attributes, as well as a unique sign and everlasting covenant between Him and His people (Exodus 31:12-17). It plays a crucial part in our relationship with God. Would He ever approve our renouncing the Sabbath to keep from harm? Imperial and Papal Rome martyred many Christians because they held this part of God's law as inviolate.

» **Fifth Commandment:** A current cultural trend is disrespect toward parents by both adolescent and grown children. However, in Deuteronomy 27:16, God pronounces a death sentence on children who treat their parents with contempt. Likewise, He would condemn a person who broke this commandment to save his skin.

» **Seventh Commandment:** The spiritual principle behind adultery and fornication is *faithlessness to an agreement, covenant, or contract*. God accuses Israel of harlotry because they were unfaithful to their covenant with Him. Even though it is highly unlikely that we would ever be "asked" to commit sexual immorality to save our lives, could we break an agreement or contract to protect our lives or properties? Would God wink at our breaking our eternal covenant with Him—sealed with His Son's blood—in the interest of self-preservation?

» **Eighth Commandment:** The psalmist writes that, in all of his life, he has "not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his descendants begging bread" (Psalm 37:25). We would *not* be justified in stealing food—or anything else—to preserve life when God shows repeatedly in His Word that He will provide for the righteous (Matthew 6:25, 33).

» **Ninth Commandment:** It is extremely easy to lie to save oneself or one's family. Anyone up against a wall with a gun to his head would be tempted to tell a "little white lie" to stay alive. Under the perceived threat of death because of Sarah's beauty, Abraham told a "half-truth" to Abimelech. God did not accept this behavior from the "father of the faithful." Would He be pleased with us in any similar situation?

» **Tenth Commandment:** In its wider application, the command against coveting deals with the root of one's sin against his neighbor: attitudes, desires, and secret thoughts. If our "neighbor" is robbing or threatening us, would God hold us guiltless for "coveting" our neighbor's life—desiring that his life be taken—if God has not ordained it?

It is evident that God does not allow us to suspend His inexorable law if our life is threatened. Human nature, though, insists on a "self clause." Human nature tells us that God's law is fine *unless* it goes contrary to what we perceive as our best interests.

Sovereignty and Submission

At the core of this question, as with our entire Christian walk, is *government*—not the government of a nation but the issue of *whom* we will allow to govern us. In this instance, either we can govern ourselves by "deciding" when it is permissible to kill, or we can submit to God's benevolent authority and His explanation of morality. In the final analysis, we are not allowed to determine what is right and wrong—God has already done this. Our only decision is *if* we will act in accordance with God's law!

Each of the nine examples above arrays the "all-important" self against God and His royal law—polar opposites. What we decide demonstrates what we hold in the higher regard, that is, what we worship. For example, if we break the Sabbath or deny its importance in our lives, we are choosing the self over God. Likewise, if we intentionally—non-accidentally—take another man's life in defense of our own, we are worshipping the self rather than God.

Romans 8:7 describes this power struggle perfectly: "Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be." Human nature puts its own cares and interests above God, and the result is that the carnal man will not submit himself to God's clear commands. The carnal man will be willing to harm, even kill, another created human being to protect his own interests, in spite of God's law and Jesus Christ's striking example to the contrary.

Judge, Jury, and Executioner

To further illustrate how prominent the self is in this, in taking another man's life, one is acting as his judge, jury, and executioner. This, then, also involves the sin of presumptuousness. Of these three roles, the only authority God has given us is to *judge*. He commands us to judge—to consider a matter in the light of His definition of right and wrong—but it is not our place to decide a sentence or to carry it out. To do so presumes authority not granted to us.

As we saw earlier, the self-defense scenario does not hold up when considered in light of the other nine commandments. We can undertake a similar exercise in terms of one acting as judge, jury, and executioner. What other scenarios could we imagine that would justify killing another person in response to or in anticipation of a sin? Should we emulate the radical followers of Islam and kill anyone who does not convert to Christianity? Should we shoot someone because he has an idol in his house? Can we murder a man because we overheard him telling a lie or stone a woman taken in adultery?

These examples are absurd because God says *every* sin requires the death penalty (Romans 6:23). Not a single person would be alive if God responded to sin as carnal man wants to respond to sins that directly affect him. Also, consider that, in the scenario of killing in self-defense, the one killing is judging that *his* life is more important than the life he is willing to snuff out. One sinner accounts his life to be of more worth than the life of another sinner. Would God make the same determination?

Protection According to God's Will

The rewards and benefits of the Old Covenant were largely centered on physical health, material wealth, and national greatness, while its purpose was to prepare the nation for the Messiah's first coming (Galatians 3:19, 24). Because of this emphasis on the physical, many scriptures in the Old Testament demonstrate God's intent to shield and protect Israel if they would obey. They could depend on their national and individual protection if they adhered to God's Word. If they remained faithful to the covenant, God would protect them—it was a sure thing!

Because the reasons for the Old Covenant and the New Covenant are very different, we have to look at the subject of God's protection through the lens of God's purpose. The intent of the New Covenant is to develop a personal relationship with God, leading to eternal life and godly character. God is willing to do whatever it takes to bring us to the point He desires. Thus, He will sometimes remove His protection when it serves His purpose.

Even faithful Christians may have their houses burglarized, their cars stolen, or their property vandalized. They may be the victims of physical or sexual assault. They may be persecuted and even martyred. While some may be the recipients of violence as a natural consequence of their actions, others will receive it more or less undeserved, just as Jesus Christ did.

God might allow a man to suffer violence to see how His creative work is coming along, as a potter tests to discern the quality of his clay and the design of his vessel. He might remove a portion of His hedge, not necessarily to punish us, but to instruct us when nothing else will get through.

Under the New Covenant, God does not promise us complete protection (Matthew 5:11-12, 44; 10:23; John 15:20; 16:33; I Thessalonians 3:4; II Timothy 3:12; II Corinthians 11:23-28). However, we *are* assured that, if we fall victim to violence, it is either because of our actions (Galatians 6:7) or because God is working something out that we may not discern at the time. If we are called by God, and if we reciprocate by loving Him, we have His sure promise that all things will work together for good (Romans 8:28).

Pacifism or Faith?

Some contend that God's prohibition against killing is "pacifist" or "weak." Does it take more strength to abide by God's law and suffer the consequences from man or to give in and lash out like

the rest of mankind? Others argue that we have to "do our part" in taking care of our property and ourselves. But where does God ever tell us that "our part" includes *sinning*?

What it really boils down to is what a person's faith is in: God or self. Do we trust God to shield us according to His will after we understand the moral limits He has set on our actions?

Our Creator has called us to a personal relationship with Him, and our trust in His nature and faithfulness will determine our responses and actions. A living faith goes far beyond lip service and demonstrates what we truly believe. If God is real to us, and if He is sovereign in our lives, we will conduct ourselves according to His law—even when threatened—because we believe in His ability to accomplish His purpose and bring us into His Kingdom.

Inset: Is Exodus 22:2 Contradictory?

Exodus 22:2 seems to contradict the idea that Christians should not kill in self-defense: "If the thief is found breaking in, and he is struck so that he dies, there shall be no guilt for his bloodshed." At first glance, this seems to support the "self-defense in one's home" argument, but like Numbers 35:16-28, the distinction is accidental versus intentional. The next verse, Exodus 22:3, explains this: "If the sun has risen on him [the killer], there *shall be* guilt for his bloodshed."

This statute illustrates that God differentiates between a killing committed when it is dark and one done when it is light. The meaning is not that darkness gives us license to break God's law, but rather that in the dark it is more difficult to determine what level of force is necessary to restrain an unknown intruder. The law gives the homeowner the benefit of the doubt in assuming that he would not deliberately use lethal force, since that falls under intentional or premeditated murder (Exodus 20:13).

Jesus Christ came to fulfill the law, and James also exhorts us to "fulfill the royal law" by loving our neighbors as ourselves (James 2:8). Jesus teaches that murder begins in the heart and has everything to do with intention, even if the act of killing is not followed through: "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.' But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment" (Matthew 5:21-22).

This instruction reiterates that murder is either accidental or intentional, based on what is in the heart. When applied to Exodus 22:2-3, Christ's words show that when a thief is killed in the dark, there is a good chance that the homeowner acted without animosity or premeditation. But if a homeowner kills a thief when nothing in the circumstance hinders his judgment, he is without excuse—the act was intentional, and he is guilty of murder.