

# The Death Penalty and God

by Bob Pulliam

Should we really put a person to death after they have turned to God and repented? After all, we are to forgive as our heavenly father would forgive. Such is the reasoning of some in many cases of "Jailhouse Religion". As you know I did not coin that phrase. It exists because of a common problem. Myriad have been the numbers of prisoners released in the wake of "finding religion", only to go forth and repeat their sins.

There is a sociological and statistical argument to be made here; but such is irrelevant to a higher reasoning to which we must yield. God has spoken on the subject of capital punishment. For any who claim to be believers, it is important that He be heard on this subject. Here, we consider God's word on the subject.

## **God and Capital Punishment...**

We certainly cannot contend that God is opposed to capital punishment. He is the one who instituted it at the beginning. After the flood, God ordained capital punishment for any who would take the life of a fellow human being:

"Surely for your lifeblood I will demand a reckoning; from the hand of every beast I will require it, and from the hand of man. From the hand of every man's brother I will require the life of man. Whoever sheds man's blood, By man his blood shall be shed; For in the image of God He made man.@ (Genesis 9:5f)

Notice here that it is "by man" a murderers blood is required. Arguments about God striking a murderer dead if He wanted it to be so are ridiculous and foolish. This ordinance is not being stated as a part of the Old Testament law here. The Old Testament law would not be given for hundreds of years. The reason for this law's existence is stated: "for in the image of God He made man." If that reason still exists, then the law is still binding. And, truly, we are still in the image of God.

## **The Old Testament and Capital Punishment...**

The Law of Moses stated, "Thou shalt not kill." (Ex 20:13) A silly argument is raised here, saying that capital punishment is killing, and therefore violates this command. Such is silly because of the overall context of the Law. It commanded capital punishment for several sins (see below), and makes it evident that a distinction is to be made between the act of murder and the civil requirement to take a life because of a capital offence. Capital offences included:

Idolatry (Ex 22:20)  
Witchcraft (Ex 22:18)  
Blasphemy (Lev 24:11ff)  
Breaking Sabbath (Num 15:32ff)  
Murder (Ex 21:12)  
Kidnaping (Ex 21:16)  
Dishonoring Parents (Ex 21:15)  
Adultery (Lev 20:10)  
Rape (Dt 22:25ff)  
And a few others...

God clearly demanded the forfeiture of life in certain cases.

## **The New Testament and Capital Punishment...**

The New Testament is not silent on the subject of capital punishment. There are two scriptures of special note here. Both affirm the state's right to carry out capital punishment.

The first passage is Romans 13:1-4. Here we find that the civil authority does not "bear the sword in vain". Some wish to make this a metaphor for punishment in general, and not meant to affirm a right to capital punishment. Metaphors, however, must include what they readily represent. Are we to believe that Paul used the instrument of capital punishment as a symbol and did not intend for it to be included in the authorities' rights? How absurd!

The second passage is Acts 25:11. Here Paul gives the authorities the "green light" to put him to death if he has done anything worthy of death. When he says, "For if I... have committed anything worthy of death, I do not object to dying..." Now how could he utter such words if it would have been wrong to exercise capital punishment? Paul's words could be applied to anyone: "if they have done anything worthy of death, I do not object to their dying". But this isn't the way many professed Christians feel about the matter.

Here is where we need to consider the subject of a "born again Christian" on death row. Was Paul a Christian? You know he was! Did he plead for his life on the basis of repentance? No! If he had done anything worthy of death, then they needed to go ahead and put him to death! But Paul was there for preaching the truth, not a brutal pickax murder.

### **Was Paul Guilty of Murder?...**

Paul himself told Agrippa that he had cast his vote against Christians that they might be put to death (Acts 26:10). Nowhere do we read of Paul personally taking the life of another. Paul was acting within the bounds of the Old Testament law for the purpose of serving God. He did such in good conscience (Acts 23:1). This does not justify his error, but it also does not put him in an analogous situation to a murderer today. Paul violated no civil statute or ordinance in his actions. Some have tried to group murderers together with Paul. They ought to be ashamed of themselves. Was Paul really guilty of anything like unto the sin of modern day murderers?

### **Conclusion...**

Everybody's brother and his mother seeks a politically correct standing by going to the Bible and pulling out passages on forgiveness. But they cannot seem to find "Whoever sheds man's blood, By man his blood shall be shed; For in the image of God He made man." (Gen 9:6).

Remember that the victims of murderers were created in the image of God. A murderer's sobriety, penitence, number of protesters, clergy support, etc., are all irrelevant when one considers God's word. Do I believe a murderer can find forgiveness in the eyes of God? Yes I do. But such does not change the required consequences of taking the life of one created in the image of God.

Does it bring back the dead?... No, and it is not intended to do so. Does it deter people from committing murder?... Probably not the way we carry it out in this day and age... "Because the sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil." (Eccl 8:11) But this matters not. Capital punishment is also a question of **justice**. Statistics mean nothing when God has already stated His will.