

## WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS ABOUT CAPITAL PUNISHMENT

The conviction of Curtis Vance for killing Ann Pressly made national news last week. He was given life in prison without parole.

What does the Bible say about current events which are on the minds of many in this area? What does the Bible teach us about capital punishment?

Ever since Noah, God made a covenant not to destroy the world with water (**Genesis 9:1-17**). He gave the rainbow as a token of that covenant (**v.16-17**). We also have our responsibility in this covenant (**v.4-7**). The shedding of innocent blood is forbidden, and it is to be punished with the shedding of the murderer's blood (**v.6**).

A lot of things in the world changed in Genesis 9. One of those may well be the beginning of capital punishment. With a long lifespan and no system of capital punishment, it is no wonder that the world before the flood is described as *filled with violence* (**Gen. 6:11**). It demonstrates the need for the law which God established.

Innocent blood pollutes the land where it is shed. This is made very clear by Moses in **Numbers 35:33**: "*So you shall not pollute the land where you are; for blood defiles the land, and no atonement can be made for the land, for the blood that is shed on it, except by the blood of him who shed it.*"

The deeds of Manasseh illustrate this well. **2 Kings 21:16** says that he shed so much innocent blood that he filled Jerusalem from one end to the other. After Josiah's exceptional reforms, **2 Kings 23:25-27** says that God's judgment still remained on the land because of the blood Manasseh had shed; no amount of repentance and doing good deeds can change this (**2 Kings 24:3-4**). The only remedy was the blood of the murderer.

Capital punishment is also included in the teaching of Christ. Paul, inspired by the Holy Spirit, said that if he did anything worthy of death that he would respect that punishment (**Acts 25:11**). If capital punishment is ungodly, then this would have been his opportunity to say so. Paul also said that government's responsibility to punish lawbreakers with the sword comes from God (**Romans 13:1-7**).

Many who profess to be Christians claim that capital punishment is the opposite of the grace and love that Jesus taught and demonstrated by His actions. After all, He prayed that those crucifying Him be forgiven for their ignorant actions (**Luke 23:34**).

It is precisely here that the parallel breaks down. The individual being wronged has the right and the opportunity to forgive even while he is being mistreated (**Acts 7:60**). The family of a murder victim can forgive a murderer for taking away their loved one, but they cannot presumptuously speak on behalf of the victim himself. Not the victim, but *the blood* of the victim, cries out to God from the ground that is being polluted (**Genesis 4:10-12**).

God has given the law to apply justice on behalf of the murder victim. The context in **Numbers 35:30-34** and **Deuteronomy 19:13** teach that there is to be no discrimination in the application of the death penalty (a common argument against the death penalty today; ironically, the manner of application actually encourages discrimination).

Another problem with the modern application of capital punishment is the time between the crime and the consequence. The wise king Solomon said that because a sentence for an evil work is not executed speedily, the hearts of the sons of men are fully set in them to do evil (**Ecclesiastes 8:11**). It is important not only to do the right thing; it must be done in the right way.

Lest anyone get the idea that God believes in a rush to judgment, provisions were made to make sure of the guilt of the accused before he was put to death. At least two witnesses were required (**Numbers 35:30**). To prevent false testimony to punish the innocent, the law said that the false accuser would be punished with the punishment intended for the falsely accused (**Deut. 21:15-21**).

If death is not accidental or self-defense, then it is murder. Justice requires death of the murderer. God's way is effective...if we apply it.

