

# GENESIS 9:6 AND CAPITAL PUNISHMENT

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This article started out as a response to recent questions I received about capital punishment. Although I began contemplating this subject many years ago, it is only now that I am compelled to actually write at length about it. The questions were prompted after a sister read the following commentary:

They have authority from God to execute rebels. Genesis 9:6 authorizes capital punishment for murder. God authorized even imperfect governments to administer the death penalty to punish and deter crime. God has the authority to punish evil (12:19), and he delegates that authority to civil rulers.<sup>1</sup>

To suit the purpose and outline of this article, I have edited the sister's questions. Nevertheless, I assure you that they remain virtually identical to the originals. Here they are:

- *What does Genesis 9:6 mean?*
- *Does God allow the imposition of death penalty by the law to punish evil doers?*

Before proceeding, you should know that this article represents my own opinions and convictions. It is advisable that you also consider the thoughts of others whom you believe are knowledgeable, mature, and wise. Thereafter, I encourage you to arrive at your own conclusions and form your own convictions.

Also, it will be necessary to define a couple of important terms first:

- *Directive*: This refers to an authoritative instruction for dealing with or handling a specific situation.
- *Principle*: In contrast to directives, principles are general guidelines meant to help us arrive at sound and wise judgments on a broader range of situations.
- In the Bible, directives are often straightforward and not open to interpretation, just obedience. On the other hand, we rely on principles to guide our decision-making in the absence of directives.

**Note:** Scripture quotations herein are from the New International Version (NIV), 2011 edition.

## MEANING OF GENESIS 9:6

Personally, I do not believe that **Genesis 9:6** authorizes “governments to administer the death penalty” for the simple reason that it is not a NT directive. As such, it does not—in fact, it cannot—authorize any government today to impose capital punishment. To the best of my knowledge, the NT is silent (it does not say anything one way or another) about this particular subject<sup>2</sup>.

Now, the OT did authorize the ancient Israelites to impose capital punishment for murder (see **Numbers 35:16-21, 30-33**), but keep in mind that their religion and their government were one and the same. Today in our country, there is separation of religion and state. Further, neither **Genesis 9:6** nor **Numbers 35:16-21, 30-33** is reintroduced or restated into the NT<sup>3</sup>, so neither can be used as a directive today.

Assuming there is no NT directive, we must rely on biblical principles (meaning from both OT and NT) for guidance. I see at least two principles that can guide us here; the first is in **Genesis 9:5-6**:

**“And for your lifeblood I will surely demand an accounting. I will demand an accounting from every animal. And from each human being, too, I will demand an accounting for the life of another human being.**

**“Whoever sheds human blood,  
by humans shall their blood be shed;  
for in the image of God  
has God made mankind.”**

This passage gives us crucial insights into the mind of God. Evidently, what makes murder so heinous is the fact that it snuffs out an individual who was created in His image. To commit murder is to essentially violate the very image of God. That is why He takes it so seriously; hence, capital punishment.

So, what does **Genesis 9:6** mean? I believe this verse is meant to teach us to ascribe such high value upon the sanctity of God's image, which He has so graciously given each human being the honor and privilege of bearing. Anyone who dares to violate this sanctity will have to answer to God!

### CAPITAL PUNISHMENT AND THE LAW

I believe God allows governments today to impose capital punishment on heinous crimes. Now, I am not contradicting myself here. Remember, I simply said that **Genesis 9:6** is not a NT directive, which means it cannot actually authorize capital punishment. Nevertheless, its principle—the sanctity of the image of God, which every human being bears—is part of why I believe He allows capital punishment today.

Now, the second biblical principle is relevant here—**Romans 13:1-4**:

**Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and you will be commended. For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer.**

Notice that this passage does not directly say anything about capital punishment, although verse 4b hints at it—**rulers do not bear the sword for no reason**. Rather, it directs us to **be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established**. God Himself established governments, which implies that He delegated His authority to them. This is why we must submit to the laws of our government. In view of verse 2—**whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves**—to disobey the law is to risk incurring God's judgment.

Now, here is where the matter becomes somewhat circumstantial. If a government, by way of legislation, decides to impose capital punishment on heinous crimes, then that becomes the law and the people are to subscribe to it. On the other hand, if a government legislates against capital punishment, then that too is the law and the people are to likewise subscribe to it.

So, does God allow the imposition of death penalty by the law to punish evil doers? The simple answer is that if a government decides to impose capital punishment via legislation, then we are to take it that God allowed it in view of **Romans 13:1-4**.

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While I do not believe that **Genesis 9:6** authorizes “governments to administer the death penalty,” I agree that capital punishment, if properly implemented, makes an effective deterrent for crime, and that God delegates His authority to civil rulers for punishing evil.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> I am quoting from the sister's e-mail, not directly from the commentary she cited. Nevertheless, I proceeded under

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the assumption that it was quoted verbatim.

<sup>2</sup> I do not claim complete biblical knowledge here. Hence, I am open to being persuaded should it become evident that there is an actual NT directive on the imposition of capital punishment.

<sup>3</sup> Any OT directive that was reintroduced or somehow restated into the NT is binding today. For example, nine of the Ten Commandments were either reintroduced or restated (the command about Sabbath-keeping was left out), which means we are to adhere to them faithfully.