

Self-Defense And The Use Of Force: A Biblical Perspective

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The recent escalation of violence and an unprecedented expansion of government power is forcing more and more people to consider the question of self defense. Is it right to use physical or lethal force to protect oneself or others? The question is not new. Cycles of controversy over the question can be traced back for centuries.

For some people, the question of the use of physical or lethal force is merely a *legal* one. Unbelievers and nonreligious people have little difficulty with this question, for their decision is based exclusively upon personal, social and temporal considerations, not *spiritual* and *eternal* ones. While there may be conscience concerns for such people, those concerns are not shaped by God or His word.

For the Christian, however, there are certain spiritual, moral and eternal considerations. He walks, not “by sight,” as does the materialist, but “by faith” (2 Corinthians 5:7). His conscience is directed by the Scriptures, not by mere human reasoning. He knows that he will be judged by those Scriptures, so he wants to be sure that his actions are authorized by God (John 12:48).

The use of force against one’s fellow man does not come naturally to the Christian. Luke 9:51-56 records the story of Jesus going to Jerusalem. He instructed His disciples to prepare a place to stay in a Samaritan village, but when the Samaritans saw that “*His face was set towards Jerusalem,*” they refused to allow Him to stay. This angered James and John, and they asked Jesus if He wanted them to command fire from heaven to destroy them. Jesus rebuked the disciples, telling them, “*You do not know what manner of spirit you are.*” He continued, “*The Son of Man did not come to destroy men’s lives, but to save them.*” Of course, these Samaritans posed no threat to Jesus or the disciples, so the proposed response by James and John was unreasonable and wrong. Christians are told to “*live peaceably with all men*” **to the extent that such is possible** (Romans 12:18). But what are we authorized to do in situations where peace is **not** possible? What are we to do if we or others are physically attacked?

The Reason For This Study

As I mentioned before, the world is becoming increasingly dangerous. Tyrannical governments continue to amass power and control. History

demonstrates that the vast majority of violence inflicted against people has been carried out by governments. Every day in America, people are raped, assaulted, kidnapped and murdered. Places where people were once immune to the threat of physical harm are now unsafe. Random acts of violence are becoming more commonplace. Many of our larger cities and areas along our southern border are plagued with drug and gang related violence. In place of the relatively harmless “cat burglars” of the past, people now face heavily armed home invaders who have no respect for human life. Mass shootings continue to occur at a steady pace. Some people become violent and abusive for as little reason as their favorite sports team losing a game. Social and political unrest often result in violent demonstrations. The rejection of basic moral standards has caused some people to have little or no respect for the sanctity of human life, causing them to become dangerous to others. It is important that we understand what we are authorized to do to protect ourselves.

Misconceptions About Protection

1. “I Will Just Pray For Safety” - Yes we should “pray,” but some religious people believe that mere prayer *alone* can protect them from dangerous people. They have convinced themselves that God will miraculously intervene to protect them from dangerous people and circumstances, and that they have no personal responsibility in providing for their own protection or that of others. This view is naive and reflects a misunderstanding of the nature and purpose of prayer. While we should pray for safety, we must also do what is necessary for our safety. We are instructed to pray for our daily food (Matthew 6:11), but if we refuse to work, we will not eat (2 Thessalonians 3:10; Ephesians 4:28). One can pray for safety all day long, but if he steps in front of a fast-moving train he will be injured or killed. Prayer operates in the realm of providence. We are told to “*pray without ceasing*” (1 Thessalonians 5:17), but praying does not relieve us of our personal responsibility, nor will it eliminate the effects of “*time and chance*” which “*happens to them all*” (Ecclesiastes 9:11).

2. “I Will Talk The Attacker Down” - Some people hope to rely upon the power of the argument. They want to believe that *all* people can be ultimately talked out of their evil intentions. They assume that the “soft answer” of Proverbs 15:1 will always have the same dissuading influence upon all people, and while it will work with some criminals, it will not work with many. The Bible teaches that some people are beyond reason. They are like “unreasoning animals” (2 Peter 2:12). Their consciences are “seared” (1 Tim. 4:2). Their minds will not be changed by verbal appeals.

They must be stopped or deterred by other means, often by *physical force*. While the Christian is to *assume no evil* of others (1 Corinthians 13:5), he is to also be cautious and discerning (Matthew 10:16, "*wise as serpents*"). He is to judge others by their actions (Matthew 7:16). The attacker, assaulter, rapist and murderer do not behave as they do because they are interested in conducting a Bible study with their victims. They are motivated by other things.

3. "I Believe In Turning The Other Cheek" - Many religious people cite the *turn-the-other-cheek* principle of Matthew 5:39 as a prohibition against all use of protective force. Jesus said, "*You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'* But I say unto you, do not resist the one who is evil. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also" (Matthew 5:38, 39). However, Jesus was condemning *retaliation*, not self-protection. The Jews of Jesus' day were as guilty of ignoring the context of Exodus 21:24 as many people are today with Matthew 5:39. According to the convoluted application that some people make of Matthew 5:39, if a rapist broke into your house and raped your wife, you would be obligated to also offer him your daughter! This is foolish and dangerous reasoning. The argument suggests that if an attacker were to cut off your right arm with a machete, you should then extend your left arm for him to also cut off! This is not what Jesus teaches in Matthew 5:39. There is a difference between protecting oneself and seeking retaliation. Both Jesus and Paul protected themselves from angry mobs on various occasions.

4. "I Let My Conscience Guide Me" - Conscience is typically invoked in two different ways with respect to the use of lethal force in self defense:

- a. Some people classify themselves as "conscientious objectors" with regard to the use of lethal or potentially lethal force. They object to the use of any force that might result in the death of another person. This applies to participation in law enforcement and military service, as well as a civilian defending himself or others from an attacker. It is not my purpose in this article to violate the scruples of others or to impose my personal opinions upon others. Romans 14 does provide for differences with respect to personal conscience. However, plain Bible truths must be honestly considered and should not be lightly dismissed. For example, Ephesians 5:25-29 teaches that true *love* obligates a husband to "nourish and cherish" his wife. He is to protect her to the extent of sacrificing his own life for her. This is not an option for the husband - it is a divine obligation. 1 Timothy 5:8 shows

that he has this obligation for his entire family. We will later consider this passage more fully.

- b. Conversely, other people cite their conscience as their sole authority for their actions. They justify their use of deadly force by the fact that it doesn't violate their conscience. But, for the conscience to be an a safe guide it must be properly educated. Prior to his conversion, the former apostle Paul believed that it was right for him to *persecute* and *injure Christians* (Acts 26:9-11; 8:1-3; 9:1; 1 Tim. 1:13). Though Paul's actions made him the "chief of sinners" (1 Tim. 1:15), he claimed that his conscience was "good" during that time in his life (Acts 23:1; 24:16). Paul did evil but his conscience approved his actions. This means that Paul's conscience was not an adequate guide at that time in his life. His conscience was improperly educated. For one's conscience to serve as an acceptable guide it must be properly educated.

5. "The Bible Says, 'Thou Shalt Not Kill'" - Some people object to the use of force against others by citing Scriptures that condemn "killing." Exodus 20:13 says, "*Thou shalt not kill*" (King James Version). It is often argued that this prohibition against killing is a prohibition against *all types* of killing, including *defensive* killing. Some refuse to use protective force for fear that it might result in the death of the perpetrator, thus the violation of the 6th Commandment. This view is based upon a misunderstanding of Exodus 20:13 and related passages (Deut. 5:17; Matt. 5:21; 19:18; Rom. 13:9). It is a classic case of oversimplification. The Hebrew verb, "kill" (*ratsach*) that is used in Exodus 20:13 is one that suggests killing *with deliberation* and *premeditation*. The meaning is best expressed by the word "**murder,**" as is used by the translators of the New King James Version, New American Standard Bible, English Standard Version, New International Version and others. "Murder" is the premeditated killing of innocent life with malice aforethought. Thus, only a certain type of killing is prohibited by Exodus 20:13. It does not address or condemn *all* killing.

Proof of this is found in the immediate context of Exodus 20. Just one chapter earlier, God imposed the death penalty upon those who touched Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:12). Just one chapter later, God imposed the death penalty upon those who committed murder: Exodus 21:12 says, "*Anyone who strikes a man and kills him shall surely be put to death.*" As did Genesis 9:6, this passage required the execution of murderers. Many other capital offenses are listed in the Old Testament (Ex. 21:15-17; 22:18, 19; 31:14; Lev. 20:2,10; 24:14; Deut. 19:16-19; 22:21-25). If Exodus 20:13

forbids *all killing*, then what explanation can be given for the many other passages that require the killing of certain evildoers? Obviously, some have oversimplified Exodus 20:13 by ignoring the meaning of the term and by isolating it from the dozens of other Scriptures that authorize and require killing in certain instances and for certain crimes.

6. “Killing An Attacker Removes His Chance Of Ever Being Saved” -

While it is true that death removes a sinner’s chance of being saved, it is NOT true that it is the innocent defender’s fault. The attacker who is killed in the commission of his *godless act* is himself responsible for his lost spiritual condition. By his actions, the attacker removes his own chance of being saved. Innocent people are *not* to be blamed for the sinful choices and actions of others (Ezekiel 18:20). Incidentally, my citing the book of “Ezekiel” might remind some readers of chapters 3 and 33 of the book, which speak of the prophet’s duty to “warn” sinners. I should point out that God had reference to sinners who would *listen* to the prophet’s reproofs, not to the Babylonian invaders who were “a god unto themselves” and had no interest in God’s word.

Those who make this argument fail to consider its implications with respect to God Himself. If innocent people are responsible for the souls of vicious criminals that they may kill in self defense, then God must be responsible for the souls of the hundreds of millions (most likely billions, consider Noah’s flood) that He has killed in their punishment! If the home defender “takes the hope of heaven away” from the armed invader, then God “took the hope of heaven away” from Nadab, Abihu, Ananias, Sapphira, Herod and millions of other people! The argument indicts even God. The argument is obviously ill-conceived and flawed. It has no merit at all. In point number 5 above, I listed several examples of capital punishment. At God’s direct command the members of the community were to execute the perpetrator. Were the executioners responsible for the criminal’s spiritual fate? Did God condemn people for doing what He told them to do? Of course not! Romans 13:4 authorizes civil government to execute evildoers. Do policemen, prosecutors, judges, juries and executioners “take away” the evil-doers “chance to go to heaven” when they do the job that God authorized them to do? Of course not! People are responsible for their own behavior. The attacker who is killed in the commission of his crime will bear his own fate. As we shall see from plain Bible passages, the defender is not responsible for the spiritual consequences of the perpetrator’s actions.

The Principle of Protection

In defining marital love, Paul says, “*For no man ever hated his own body, but feeds it and cares for it, just as Christ does the church*” (Ephesians 5:29). Paul used as the basis of his argument a man’s natural inclination to protect and preserve his own life. As a man *naturally* and *instinctively* protects his own body, so should he naturally and instinctively protect and care for his wife. After all, the marriage relationship makes the man and his wife “one flesh” (Eph. 5:31).

By divine design, humans and other creatures are equipped with protective features, abilities and instincts. The immune system protects against disease and infection. Vital organs are encased in bone for their protection. Pain sensors alert us to destructive actions that may damage our bodies. The body’s autoimmune system is triggered automatically in response to infections and antigens. We react reflexively to things that harm us. We flinch when poked by sharp objects and when touching hot surfaces. We often jump back when we encounter snakes and dangerous animals. These are automatic *defensive* responses to harmful things. The very fact that God designed us with various defensive reflexes and capabilities tells us that self-defense is natural and right.

Furthermore, this protection principle extends beyond just that of *self-protection*, for animals and humans instinctively protect their young. In doing so, they protect those that are too small or too weak to protect themselves.

While lessons from nature and design are interesting and instructive, the Christian is instructed to “*do all by the authority of Christ*” (Colossians 3:17). Since his conclusions regarding the use-of-force have the potential to affect his behavior towards his fellow man and his standing before God, the person of faith looks to the statements and principles of Scripture for his guidance. He knows that the Scriptures are a “right” and safe guide (Psalm 19:8; 119:128).

Protection And Use-Of-Force Scriptures

From several different passages we will learn that God authorizes individuals to protect themselves against physical harm. Some passages contain examples of people *fleeing* from danger. Others show people *hiding* or *escaping* from dangerous people and situations. Others authorize the use of force, including *fighting* and even *killing*.

Luke 4:29, 30 – Jesus Protected Himself: Upon hearing Jesus’ comments in the Synagogue at Nazareth, the Jews angrily drove Jesus to a cliff, intending to cast Him over the edge. “*But passing through their*

*midst, He went away.” John 8:59 says, “Then took they up stones to cast at Him, but Jesus hid Himself, and went out of the Temple, going through the midst of them, and so passed by.” John 10:39 also speaks of Jesus escaping an angry mob. John 7:30 and 8:20 tell us that authorities wanted to arrest Jesus, “...but no man laid hands on Him, for His hour was not yet come.” While people differ over whether or not Jesus invoked supernatural powers in these escapes (I affirm that He did), the fact remains that Jesus did escape and hide in order to save Himself from injury or death. Whether by prowess or by divine power, Jesus took actions to *protect Himself*. Of course, when the right “hour” did eventually come, Jesus voluntarily surrendered to the authorities (Jn. 13:1; 17:1; 18:1-11), and laid down His life on the Cross (Jn. 10:18; 12:27).*

John 18:36 – Responding to Pilate’s question about whether or not He was the king of the Jews, Jesus said, *“My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world then would my servants fight that I should not be delivered into the hands of the Jews...”* Notice that Jesus did not oppose “fighting” when it was physically necessary. The only reason that His servants did not fight for Him was because His kingdom was *spiritual* - not *physical*. This is why Jesus earlier rebuked Peter for his violent reaction to Malchus. Jesus told Peter, *“The cup which my Father has given me, shall I not drink it?”* (John 18:11, 11). Matthew’s account adds the fact that Jesus could have called twelve legions of angels to protect Him had he chosen to physically defend Himself, *“but how then shall the Scriptures be fulfilled, that thus it must be”* (Matthew 26:53, 54). Jesus did not wish to be physically protected from those who tortured and crucified Him, for such was His purpose for coming to the earth.

Matthew 24:16 – Jesus told those of Judea to *“flee into the mountains”* when they saw *“Jerusalem surrounded by enemies”* (Luke 21:20). Those who heeded Jesus’ warnings and watched for the signs preceding Rome’s invasion of Jerusalem could save their lives by *flight*. Jesus did not recommend *fight*, for the destruction of Jerusalem was ordained by God.

Luke 11:21, 22 – In correcting a false allegation about the casting out of devils, Jesus said, *“When a **strong man, fully armed**, guards his own palace, his goods are safe, but when one stronger than he attacks him and overcomes him, he takes away his armor in which he trusted and divides his spoil.”* Similar language is used by Jesus in Matthew 12:29. Jesus cited the “strong, fully armed man” as an illustration of strength and protection. By casting out devils Jesus proved Himself to be stronger than the devil. The illustration contains 3 pertinent truths:

- A person is safe from attack when he is sufficiently “armed” and strong enough to defend himself from his attacker.
- Force must be matched with force. An unarmed or inadequately armed homeowner/defender is more vulnerable to an intruder/attacker than one who is “fully armed.” Liberal and socialist minded bureaucrats constantly clamor for gun control, including bans on certain styles of weapons and limits on magazine capacity. The problem is that criminals, by definition, do not respect such laws. This means that the law-abiding homeowner must use government authorized low capacity ammo magazines against the high capacity ones that are used by criminals. Government gun laws always make the criminal “stronger” than the law-abiding citizen.
- While this passage does teach the principle of self-protection, it also contains a warning against “trusting” in one’s own might, armaments or ability. “Trust” is to be in GOD (1 Tim. 6:17). We must remember that the things that we use to protect ourselves come from God. We use the things that God has *provided* (providence). This includes our senses, our minds, our bodies and the defensive tools that can be manufactured from what God has provided in creation.

Matthew 24:43 – Jesus said, *“If the master of the house had known what hour the thief would come, he would have watched and **not allowed** his house to be broken into.”* Jesus did not use ungodly or immoral illustrations. He used realistic cases to which people could relate. Jesus here acknowledges the right of a homeowner to protect himself and his property.

Acts 9; 21; 22; 23 – Paul Was Protected By Others: On various occasions, the apostle Paul accepted protective assistance from others. The disciples in Damascus saved Paul from Jewish plotters by lowering him in a basket through an opening in the city wall (Acts 9:25; *see also 2 Cor. 11:32, 33*). When he was later endangered by the Jews in Jerusalem, the Romans took Paul into protective custody. While Paul was yet in Jerusalem, over forty Jewish assassins formed a conspiracy to kill him (Acts 23:12, 13). When his nephew uncovered the assassins’ plot, Paul had him inform the tribune, who then assembled a security team. The team was well armed, having two hundred soldiers, seventy cavalry and two hundred spearmen (Acts 23:23). Their orders were to deliver Paul safely to the Roman governor, Felix, in Caesarea. From the description of the military unit, and from the seriousness of the threat, it is obvious that the use of deadly force was contemplated and authorized. If it were wrong for

deadly force to be used in the defense of others, Paul would have refused the aid of the heavily armed Roman escort.

After a failed appeal before Festus, Paul made legal appeal to Caesar (Acts 25:11). Paul later explained that his reason for appealing to Caesar was that the Jews of Jerusalem had baselessly objected to his release. His appeal to Caesar was therefore a *defensive* measure.

While these passages do not show Paul personally using or preparing to use physical or deadly force, they do show him accepting the benefits of its potential use by others. This constitutes tacit approval by the apostle of the use of protective force. It serves as an approved apostolic example for us today.

Some may object, by arguing that these last passages prove that we may rely only upon government protection. This argument is faulty for a number of reasons. The Acts 9 passage has brethren protecting Paul FROM the government, not him being protected BY the government! The argument also ignores all of the other passages that I address in this article.

Exodus 22:2, 3 – The Law of Moses: *“If a thief is found breaking in and is struck so that he dies, there shall be no bloodguilt for him, but if the sun has risen on him, there shall be bloodguilt for him. He shall surely pay. If he has nothing, then he shall be sold for his theft.”* This passage authorized the use of deadly force by a Jewish homeowner against a nighttime home invader. A distinction was made between a nighttime invasion and an ordinary theft because darkness adds a degree of difficulty. In the dark a homeowner cannot quickly know important details, like whether or not the invader is armed, and if so, how well armed? Is the invader’s intention only to steal, or is it to abduct, rape, maim or kill? God’s law contained a provision for the extenuating circumstance of nighttime home invasion.

Though this law was binding during the life and ministry of Christ, we are not under the Law of Moses today (Eph. 2:14; Col. 2:14; Heb. 7:12). But as 1 Corinthians 14:34 invokes the old Law in regard to the role of women in public worship, and as Hebrews 12:5 invokes the old Law in regard to the disciplining of children, we may also consider the defense principles contained in Exodus 22 in connection with New Testament protection passages.

Luke 22:36-38 – Jesus told His disciples to purchase swords. Much effort has been spent by pacifists to minimize and even negate the impact of this passage. Some argue that there were “wild animals” in Gethsemane, and that Jesus wanted the disciples to be able to defend themselves against

those animals. However, the Bible says nothing about any dangerous wild animals in the garden. They also cite the fact that Peter was later rebuked for his misuse of the sword (Lk. 22:50, 51; Matt. 26:51, 52). However, they ignore Jesus' explanation that the hour of His death had come, and that He was obliged to fulfill Scripture through His death (Matthew 26:54). The fact that Jesus did not want to be protected by Peter on this occasion does not prove that there were *no* occasions on which Peter should protect himself or others. The biblical narrative focuses upon the spiritual work of the apostles. We only rarely see their reaction to unrelated, physical and secular events. Luke 22:36 is clear: Jesus wanted the disciples to know that they would face dangers against which they would need to protect themselves, and that they were authorized to use deadly force when necessary.

1 Corinthians 15:32 – Paul “fought with beasts” at Ephesus (1 Corinthians 15:32). Whether the word “beasts” is used literally - of animals, or figuratively - of men who behaved as animals, the fact remains that Paul “fought” with them. He did not surrender his life to the animals. He was not passive. He took whatever action necessary to protect his life.

1 Timothy 5:8 - Paul wrote, *“But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his own household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.”* This is a **protection** passage. One protects the members of his family from starvation by feeding them. He protects them from cold and heat by clothing and sheltering them. He protects them from sickness, disease and injury by providing medical care for them. He protects them from vicious animals and people by hiding or fleeing from them, or by fighting and even killing them.

1 Corinthians 6:19, 20 - Paul says, *“Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's.”* Paul tells us that our bodies and spirits belong to God and that the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. Not as some assert, by some immediate and miraculous act of indwelling, but through instruction. God “works in” saints as they do His will *“without complaining and murmuring,”* as they behave in a *“blameless and harmless”* way, as they *“shine as lights in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation,”* and as they *“hold forth the word of life”* (Philippians 2:13-16). They are *“sons of God”* who are *“led by”* the the Spirit of God (the Spirit's instructions, Romans 8:14, 16).

God created the human body as well as the human spirit. The body is the instrument through which the spirit functions in service to God (Romans 6:13). Its purpose and value should not be underestimated. Our bodies are worthy of our care and protection. We should not unnecessarily abuse our bodies, nor should we allow the purposeless destruction of the body by others. Some false religious groups find some “spiritual” value or honor in the neglect and even mutilation of the human body, but the Bible teaches no such thing (Colossians 2:23).

Conclusion

Christians are sometimes physically tortured and persecuted for their faith. They choose to suffer physically, even die, rather than compromise their faith (Revelation 2:10). However, not all physical threats and abuse are based upon or directed against faith. The Bible teaches that some men are simply cruel. They behave as “natural brute beasts” and as “dogs” ((2 Peter 2:12; Philippians 3:2). They are unfeeling, cruel and shameless. They think only of themselves and they have utter disregard for all other people. There is no biblical or logical reason why innocent people should be abused and victimized by such people. When possible, we may be able to flee and hide from dangerous people. However, there are times and circumstances when such is not possible. The lives of children or other defenseless people may be at risk. There may be no time to wait for the police. At such times we must do as Paul did - we must fight. We must use whatever force is necessary to protect innocent life.

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