

# Protecting Human Life

Exodus 21:28–32; John 10:9–15

Years ago my first job occasionally involved storm cleanup—picking up fallen brush and feeding it into the back of a woodchipper, an extremely noisy machine that ground up branches into small pieces and blew the refuse into the back of a truck, so that it could be hauled away for disposal. I never received any special training; coworkers told me to put on goggles and ear protection, wear work gloves and not get too close—that was it. Woodchippers are dangerous; a medical journal reported that thirty-one people were killed in woodchipper accidents in a ten-year period.<sup>1</sup>

The commandment “Thou shalt not kill” has been written on men’s hearts from the very beginning. This commandment *forbids* not only the deliberate taking of innocent human life but also *requires* “all lawful endeavors to *preserve* . . . life.”<sup>2</sup> Notice that the commandment is not only negative (“Don’t kill”) but positive (“Preserve life”). This is a pattern that is found throughout Scripture. This moral requirement is intuitively understood by Western societies, which have enacted laws requiring seatbelt use, child seats, machine guards, hardhats, safe storage of flammable materials, electrical wiring standards, and many more.

This appropriate concern for human life is a reflection of biblical law. Verse 33 of our present chapter requires covering an open pit, so no one falls in. Deuteronomy 22:8 says, “If you build a new house, make a railing around your roof, so that you don’t bring bloodguilt on your house if someone falls from it” (Christian Standard Bible). The goal is to *protect* human life. Human life is valuable and precious. Man alone bears the image of God.

In Old Testament times many families owned animals. Large animals, such as oxen, were valued for their ability to do heavy work. Remember Job? He had been singularly blessed of God. “His possessions were seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen, five hundred female donkeys.”<sup>3</sup> The sheep were used for food and for their wool. The camels and donkeys were used for transport. The five-hundred yoke of oxen—that’s a thousand oxen!—were used for plowing. Think of how many servants Job must have had, to manage all these animals. Job certainly could not feed, tend and work all these animals on his own. Now Job certainly had more animals than anyone else, but other people had animals too. Owning an ox or a donkey helped to pull a person up from abject poverty. It allowed a farmer to cultivate more land and feed his family better, with extra for the poor.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Woodchipper#Safety> accessed 4-12-25

<sup>2</sup> Westminster Shorter Catechism 68, <https://opc.org/sc.html>

<sup>3</sup> Job 1:3

But large animals could pose a danger. James Jordan observes that “the ox is a clean animal. The heifer and the pre-pubescent bullock have sweet temperaments, and can be sacrificed for human sin, for their gentle, non-violent dispositions reflect the character of Jesus Christ. When the bullock enters puberty, however, his temperament changes for the worse. He becomes ornery, testy, and sometimes downright vicious.”<sup>4</sup> Maybe you’ve read the children’s book about Ferdinand the bull. He loved to smell flowers and wouldn’t fight with other bulls—until he gets stung by a bee! But clearly Ferdinand was the exception. Unless you are extremely experienced with bulls, it is probably not a good idea to get into a ring with a bull.

Our text this morning gives God’s laws concerning dangerous property, which can cause harm to human life. The hardest case is given, that of an animal’s killing a human, made in the image of God. I have three points : (1) The value of human life; (2) The responsibility to protect it; and (3) The death of the Life-Giver. First,

### **1. The value of human life**

Our text begins, “If an ox gores a man or a woman to death, then the ox shall surely be stoned, and its flesh shall not be eaten; but the owner of the ox shall be acquitted.”

Four weeks ago we considered verse 12 of our present chapter, which stated, “He who strikes a man so that he dies shall surely be put to death.” Here is a reiteration of the principle that God first spoke to Noah after the flood (at the end of Gen. 8 and beginning of chap. 9), when Noah and his family exited the ark, built an altar to the LORD, and offered burnt offerings on the altar. The LORD was pleased with the soothing aroma and blessed Noah and his family, renewing the creation ordinance “be fruitful and multiply.” He promised that “the fear of you and the dread of you shall be on every *beast* of the earth. . . . They are given into your hand. Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you.” Devotion to God doesn’t require vegetarianism, though the believer is free to make that choice, if that’s what he likes. It is in the context of blessing Noah and his family as they worshipped that God warned, “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” (Gen. 9:5–6).

Notice that God requires the death penalty for murder—something he has never rescinded. But not only is it wrong for *man* to kill an innocent human being; it is also wrong for a wild *animal* to kill an innocent human being. The Bible doesn’t just treat an animal’s killing of a man as *accidents happen; there’s nothing that can be done about it; just forget it*. No! The Bible doesn’t treat the killing of a man,

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<sup>4</sup> James B. Jordan, *The Law of the Covenant: An Exposition of Exodus 21–23*, 122

made in the image of God, as a matter of no importance. Man is God's image-bearer, and the taking of innocent human life, whether by man or beast, brings consequences. If struck accidentally, the killer must support the victim's household. If he strikes intentionally—that is premeditated murder—the murderer forfeits his own life and dies by stoning. If a man is killed by a dangerous animal, and the animal has never injured anybody before, the ox is to be stoned, and its flesh may not be eaten; nonetheless, the owner of the ox is not be charged with premeditated murder; his punishment is the loss of his livelihood—the loss of a valuable, trained draft animal, a significant loss, as much time and attention have gone into its training. But the animal has now killed a human being, and God's law requires justice. The whole community will rise up to mete out justice. The execution will not take place out of sight in the antiseptic walls of a prison. Rather, the whole community will heartily take part in the public administration of God's justice.

James Jordan perceptively observes: “The fact that the animal is stoned indicates that the purpose of the law is not simply to rid the earth of a dangerous beast. Stoning in the Bible is the normal means of capital punishment for men. Its application to the animal here shows that animals are to be held accountable to some degree for their actions. It is also a visual sign of what happens when a . . . man rebels against authority and kills men. Stoning is usually understood to represent the judgment of God, since the Christ is “the rock” and the “stone” which threatens to fall upon men and destroy them (Matt. 21:44). In line with this, the community of believers is often likened to stones, used for building God's Spiritual Temple . . . . In stoning, each member of the community hurls a rock representing himself and his affirmation of God's judgment.”<sup>5</sup>

Capital punishment is not meted out directly by God, but by an obedient people zealous of carrying out God's justice.

With the US war machine in more-or-less constant operation we have become inured to violent killing. Presidents order bombings of foreign countries without even trying to seek a congressional declaration of war. The US military has become the president's personal attack force. Every day the news brings stories of the killing of people—not just soldiers but also innocents.

Man was created to have dominion over the animals. When animals rise up against man, they are guilty of insurrection against the very image of God. God wanted to use this opportunity to impress upon man the sanctity of human life.

Second, consider

## **2. The responsibility to protect it**

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<sup>5</sup> Jordan, *Law of the Covenant*, 123–24

“But if the ox tended to thrust with its horn in times past, and it has been made known to his owner, and he has not kept it confined, so that it has killed a man or a woman, the ox shall be stoned and its owner also shall be put to death.”

Here is a case of an owner of an ox which has gotten violent in time past. The owner has been made aware of his animal’s propensity to violence, but he has done nothing about it. Perhaps he has been busy. Maybe it’s planting, plowing or harvest season. Maybe he is shorthanded. Maybe it’s been on his to-do list but other pressing tasks have crowded out this one. Maybe his ox has been behaving better lately. In any case, a deadly incident has occurred. His ox gores a man or woman, and the victim has died. The law requires both the public execution of the ox, who caused the death, as well as of the negligent owner, who failed to keep a dangerous animal confined.

*Goring* is when an animal such as a bull pierces or stabs with the point of his horn. To die by goring is not a pleasant death.

Bullfighting is sport in Spain and Mexico. It is a dangerous sport. It is the possibility of goring that keeps bullfighting enthusiasts on the edge of their seats. A popular bullfighter experienced a serious goring a few years ago. A bull gored him in the left thigh. The horn smashed his femur and punctured a vein and an artery. He was carried from the ring with serious bleeding. He needed several blood transfusions to keep him alive, as well as two surgeries. It took him a year to recover, but he eventually returned to the ring.

If an ox gores, but does not kill, then the law of verse 19 would apply. If the victim “rises again and walks about outside with his staff,” then the owner of the animal that had been known to be a threat but had not properly restrained it “shall be acquitted. He shall only pay for the loss of his time, and shall provide for him to be thoroughly healed.” The owner of the vicious animal would pay the medical expenses of the man his animal had injured, and for the loss of his time. This would be a heavy price for his failure to keep his neighbors safe. This cost would be borne by the vicious animal’s owner, not by society at large through taxation. Crime should never pay.

Local leash laws are proper. As stated by Jordan, “if a dog gets loose and tears up a flower bed, [its] owner should be held accountable”; if a “dog kills a child, the owner should be liable to death.”<sup>6</sup> When a state, out of a desire to be more humane than God, outlaws the death penalty, it harms the victims of violence and shifts the cost onto society-at-large through taxation. The innocent and law-abiding must pay twice: pay for prisons where murderers are incarcerated, and pay for the maintenance of victims through welfare-type programs. A soft-on-crime attitude makes *society* pay, rather than *perpetrators*. This is not justice.

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<sup>6</sup> Jordan, 125

The bottom line: the owner of an animal known to be vicious is responsible to restrain his animal. Failure to properly restrain a vicious animal is criminal negligence. Under God's law a man "who does not keep his vicious animal restrained faces the possibility of death or total impoverishment and self-sale into slavery,"<sup>7</sup> if he cannot pay his debts.

Same with other dangerous property that can cause harm to human life. Property owners should take reasonable steps to protect the innocent—building fences to keep the innocent and unwary away from known dangers.

Deuteronomy 24:16 states: "Fathers shall not be put to death for their children, nor shall children be put to death for their fathers; a person shall be put to death for his own sin." "Achan's whole family perished with him, because they doubtless knew of his crime and helped him conceal it (Joshua 7). When Korah, Dathan, and Abiram rebelled against God, the family of Korah distanced themselves from Korah, and did not die with him (Numbers 26:10, 11)."<sup>8</sup>

God is the Lord and giver of life, and man is responsible to protect life. Each one of us must do our part. We might not own animals, but if we do, we take on responsibility for them. If they give clues that they might be a threat to others, we should chain them up or otherwise keep them away from other people. If we have a balcony, we should put a rail around it. If we have machinery such as lawn mowers, we should keep it locked up, so that children or others can't start them and harm themselves or others. If we have a swimming pool or trampoline or outdoor grill, we should make sure children cannot be harmed. If we are disposing of an old refrigerator, we should remove the door, so an innocent child cannot lock himself inside. If we have poisons, we should keep them locked up. We must keep our houses and automobiles in good shape so as not to be a safety hazard. Home wiring, automobile brakes and steering, furnace safety inspections should not be neglected. Knives, tools and firearms should be kept out of reach of young children. We should have first-aid kits and fire extinguishers replenished and available. We should fix broken boards on decks and make sure our door and window locks are in good order. A few years ago I read the tragic story of a young child in a high-rise apartment building who leaned against an outside window, which came off the track, allowing the child to fall to his death.

We should meditate frequently on God's holy law, praying for wisdom to apply it appropriately to our own situation. "O how love I thy law! it is my meditation all the day."<sup>9</sup>

Years ago, my parents, out of a desire to share Christ and show love to their neighbors, invited the woman and her young daughter who lived across the street

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 126, fn. 40

<sup>9</sup> Ps. 119:97

over for tea. As they sat in the kitchen chatting, the little girl wandered off and got too close to my parents' dog's dish, and the dog suddenly bit the little girl on the face, requiring medical attention. The little girl had to be taken to the hospital for treatment. Thus ended the tea! My parents were mortified. The dog was a friendly animal and had never before given any indication of being dangerous. She usually wagged her tail at whomever showed up at the door. But on this occasion she interpreted the little girl's close proximity to her food dish as a threat, and lashed out at her. My parents paid for the girl's medical treatment and had the animal euthanized. They did the right thing, considering the difficult circumstances.

We have considered the value of human life and the responsibility to protect it; lastly, consider

### **3. The death of the Life-Giver**

Our text continues: "If there is imposed on him a sum of money, then he shall pay to redeem his life, whatever is imposed on him. Whether it has gored a son or gored a daughter, according to this judgment it shall be done to him. If the ox gores a male or female servant, he shall give to their master *thirty shekels of silver*, and the ox shall be stoned."

Here are two references to sums of money. If there is imposed on the owner of the vicious animal a sum of money, then he shall pay it, whatever is imposed on him. This law applies equally to both male and female victims. If the victim happened to have been a male or female servant, the animal's owner is to give to their master *thirty shekels of silver*, and the ox shall be stoned. Why is the sum of money given to the master rather than to the servant? It is because the master, who has paid the man or woman's debt and taken the servant into his house, is responsible for his or her care and maintenance; moreover, because his servant has been gored, the master is now deprived of the servant's labor. Thus, it is the master, rather than the servant, who should be compensated.

But notice the reference to "thirty shekels of silver." Does this not remind us of the thirty pieces of silver that were paid to Judas when he betrayed our Lord Jesus? The Old Testament background is given in Zechariah 11, "Then I said to them, 'If it is agreeable to you, give me my wages; and if not, refrain.' So they weighed out for my wages *thirty pieces of silver*. And the LORD said to me, 'Throw it to the potter'—that princely price they set on me. So I took the *thirty pieces of silver* and threw them into the house of the LORD for the potter." In Matthew 26 we read that "Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests and said, 'What are you willing to give me if I deliver Him to you?' And they counted out to him *thirty pieces of silver*."

After Jesus was betrayed, Judas attempted to return the money. He threw it down in the temple and went out and hanged himself. The high priests consulted together and decided to use the blood-money to buy a field as a burial place for strangers. Matthew records: "Then was fulfilled what was spoken by Jeremiah the

prophet, saying, ‘And they took the *thirty pieces of silver*, the value of Him who was priced, whom they of the children of Israel priced, and gave them for the potter’s field, as the Lord directed me’” (Matt. 27:9–10).

Jordan observes that “a study of Leviticus 27:1–7 shows that persons were valued, depending on strength (sex and age) at between three and fifty shekels of silver. Thirty, then, is a good average; and in the case of the slave killed by the ox, *thirty shekels of silver* was mandatory. . . . Our Lord Jesus Christ was born into the world as a homeborn slave-son . . . . On the cross, he was made sin for us, and thus came under condemnation of death. He became an abject slave, that we might be elevated into the status of adopted slave-sons. He was killed by the wild beasts, the lions of paganism, and the apostate unclean goring bulls of Israel: ‘Many bulls have surrounded Me; strong ones from Bashan have encircled me. They open wide their mouth at me, as a ravening and a roaring lion. . . . Save Me from the lion’s mouth; and from the horns of the wild oxen Thou dost answer Me’ (Ps. 22:12, 13, 21). Thus, the price given for Christ’s death was the price of the gored slave, thirty pieces of silver (Matt. 26:15). At His resurrection, however, our Lord overcame the bulls and trampled on the silver for which He was sold: “Rebuke the beasts of the reeds, the herd of bulls with the calves of the peoples, trampling under foot the *pieces of silver*; He has scattered the people who delight in war” (Ps. 68:30).<sup>10</sup>

So in our Old Testament text is something that might never have occurred to the writer, Moses. In this bit of Old Testament legislation is a foreshadowing of the coming of Christ. Only God Almighty could have pulled this off.

In our New Testament text we read that “the thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly. . . . As the Father knows Me, even so I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep.”

Our Lord Jesus took on the form of a servant and went to the cross to die for us, advancing us as sons. Oh, the love that purchased our salvation! O my hearer, put your trust in the Lord Jesus. Amen.

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<sup>10</sup> Jordan, 127–28, emphasis added