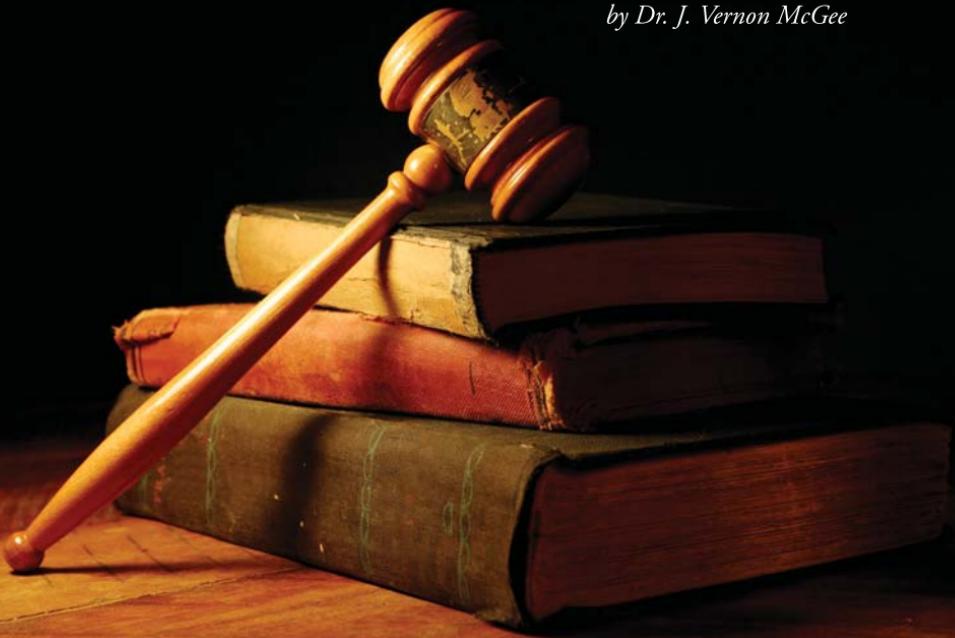


Is Capital Punishment Christian?

by Dr. J. Vernon McGee

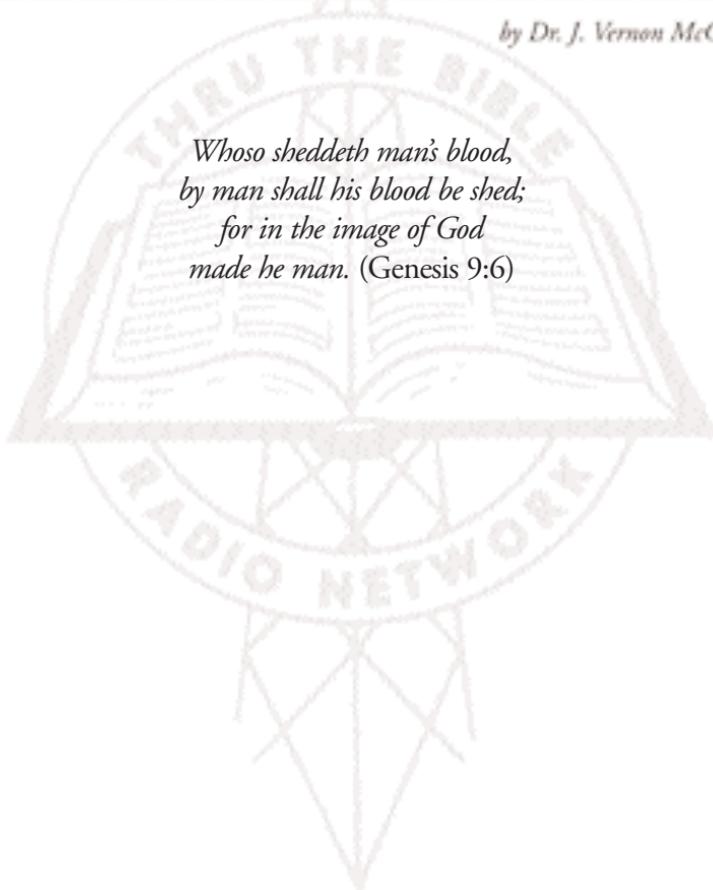


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*Whoso sheddeth man's blood,
by man shall his blood be shed;
for in the image of God
made he man. (Genesis 9:6)*



Unless noted otherwise, all Scripture references
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Is Capital Punishment Christian?

In the months leading up to the execution of Caryl Chessman back in 1960, the question of capital punishment became the prime issue. It was not a question of his guilt or innocence. He was tried, convicted, and sentenced for very brutal and sadistic crimes. The governor of California at that time did not believe in capital punishment and wanted to get rid of it in his state. A great many, of course, agreed with him in that position.

The beatniks (forerunners of the hippies), naturally, were opposed to capital punishment. In fact, one beatnik carried a placard at that time which, I think, expressed the hypocrisy of those who were attempting to defend this criminal. It read: "JESUS SAID, 'THOU SHALT NOT KILL.'" Now that is the first time that any of them had ever manifested any interest in what Jesus said or in anything that is Christian! Jesus also said, "Ye must be born again," and when any person meets that requirement, then he can carry a placard that reads, "Thou shalt not kill" – provided he tells it like it is.

The sixth commandment, "Thou shalt not kill" (Exodus 20:13), has no reference to governments at all. I have checked the work of several Hebrew scholars, and they agree that a more accurate translation is, "Thou shalt not murder." It has nothing in the world to do with government but is a commandment given to individuals. And for the breaking of that commandment, God said to the government of that day that they were to execute the one guilty of murder. In fact, God made stoning the method of capital punishment in that day.

Now, the liberal church entered the fray by declaring that capital punishment is unchristian. Liberalism is always out in left field.

It has a hang-up on everything that is off and odd. It began quite a campaign to get rid of capital punishment, saying that it was pagan and heathen, a relic of the Dark Ages, that it was not Christian, and that the Bible did not teach it. As a result, most church members were brainwashed, and I suppose that at that time the majority believed that capital punishment was unchristian and that the Bible opposed it. If a poll were taken today, I am confident that most church members in this country would still oppose capital punishment.

But what does the Bible actually say? Is capital punishment Christian, or is it unchristian?

Capital Punishment Began in Eden

Let us go back and begin where God begins. You may be saying, "Well, I'm sure that capital punishment began with the Mosaic Law." Capital punishment is *in* the Mosaic Law, but it did not *begin* there. God instituted capital punishment in the Garden of Eden. Even before man sinned God said to Adam and Eve, "In the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die" (Genesis 2:17). That is capital punishment, though you may call it by any other name you choose. The fact is that man disobeyed this commandment, and God carried out the penalty – so much so that all the children of Adam from that day down to the present are under the sentence of death. You and I are under it, and one day we will die. "In Adam all die" (1 Corinthians 15:22), and God takes full responsibility for it because man is to die as a result of his sin. Capital punishment goes back, therefore, as far as the Garden of Eden.

Outside the Garden of Eden, we find that man became a murderer. Cain killed his brother Abel. Now the immediate thing that comes to mind is that God will certainly move in on this

man because he has committed a crime for which he should be executed. But one of the strangest things imaginable took place instead. God put a mark on Cain to protect him: "And the LORD set a mark upon Cain, lest any finding him should kill him" (Genesis 4:15). This is very strange. Why would God protect this man? Well, when you read the record, you find that God had not given the great principle for human government at that time. In fact, when man was moved out of the Garden of Eden, he was no longer under the restriction of not eating of a certain tree. That was no longer the question. The question then was: Will this man, since he has the knowledge of good and evil and has a conscience, follow his conscience; and where will that conscience lead him? Of course Cain was under the curse of Adam, and in time he did die also, but God did not execute him summarily. He let Cain live. Why? Because God wanted man at that time to see the fruit of his own sin.

There came a day when Cain's sin began to bear fruit. The record tells us that he moved out away from the other children of Adam and Eve (and I am confident there were many) to establish a civilization of his own, apart from God. The Word of God mentions something of its city and pastoral life, the development of arts and manufactures. Apparently it had many of the things that we have in our civilization today. However, in the midst of that civilization there was another murderer, Lamech. "And Lamech said unto his wives, Adah and Zillah, Hear my voice; ye wives of Lamech, hearken unto my speech; for I have slain a man who wounded me, and a young man for hurting me" (Genesis 4:23). Then notice in verse 24 that he referred and reverted back to the crime of Cain: "If Cain shall be avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy and sevenfold." In substance he said, "I have killed a man in self-defense. Cain did not kill his brother in self-defense – it was cold-blooded murder. Now if *he* got by with it, *I* can get by

with it.” And so this man attempted to salve his conscience and, I am confident, was successful. He believed he was justified in what he had done.

Well, that civilization marched on until finally there was an intermarrying of that line with the godly line until the entire race was polluted and full of sin. At the time of Noah we read: “And God said unto Noah, The end of all flesh is come before me; for the earth is filled with violence through them; and, behold, I will destroy them with the earth” (Genesis 6:13). In fact, God says that when He looked down at that civilization, the only man He could find who was righteous was this man Noah. The entire world was evil – and there must have been several million on the earth at that time. “And GOD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (Genesis 6:5). In order to save man at all, He reached in when He could and saved Noah. Only one more generation and the entire human family would have been lost to God, and He would have had to destroy the entire human race.

They were living on the assumption that God would not punish sin. A great many people live by this today. They will not turn to God because they do not believe that He will punish sin.

The Human Race Sent to the Gas Chamber

There came a day when God sent mankind to the gas chamber. It was mass execution, and it included the entire line of Cain. Perhaps you are saying, “Now wait a minute, preacher. You’re going a little too far. He didn’t put them in a *gas chamber*.” Yes, He did. The two most potent gases known to man are oxygen and hydrogen. When you bring together two atoms of hydrogen and one atom of oxygen, you have water – the “gas” that God

used to execute man. I am told that drowning is a painless death – I cannot verify this by experience – and God put man in a watery gas chamber. You see, God did not let Cain get by with it; Lamech failed to get by with it; and none of mankind got by with it. There came a day when man, who wanted to follow his own conscience, had to pay for his disobedience. God judges man and makes no apology for it. The Lord Jesus referred back to the days of Noah with no apology, and you will find that the other writers of Scripture refer to the days of Noah with no apology at all. God used capital punishment, and He brought it to bear upon a sinful race at that time.

Human Government is God-Given to Protect Man

After the flood God put down some new regulations. In fact, God moved man into an altogether different period and placed him on the foundation on which the race has been from that day to this. God gave to man human government. He also put down the basis of that government:

Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God made he man. (Genesis 9:6)

Human life to God is a sacred, precious thing, because God created man in His image. But God didn't call capital punishment murder; He didn't call it obscene; He didn't call it uncivilized. He said in substance, "You are permitted now to establish government, and the highest power that a government has is capital punishment." And, friend, if government doesn't have this much power, it has no power whatsoever because it cannot beg a fallen human race to be nice little Sunday school boys and girls and wash their faces and blow their noses. The human family is made up today of a fallen race.

In order to protect mankind, when one man dares to take the life of another, that man is to be executed, and God gives that power to human government. Unless a government uses the power that God has given to it, it will have riots, revolution, and finally it will be overturned.

It is not my purpose to deal with the Ten Commandments, but a great many people have lifted out this one, "Thou shalt not kill." That commandment, of course, was never given to a government. The Ten Commandments are for *individuals*. They are the expression of the mind of God relative to what the individual man ought to be. It is the norm for human conduct. And God gave to the nation Israel authority to execute anyone who broke the commandments. In that day a murderer did not have a long trial, and there was no attempt to find some psychological reason for his crime. If he did it and it was premeditated (they made that distinction), he was executed. If it was manslaughter, that is, accidental, the man was not punished – although he would have to make some sort of restitution to those he had injured.

God is Interested in the Victim

Back when Caryl Chessman was on death row, it was sickening to see a certain crowd made up of beatniks and others who went around weeping crocodile tears for this criminal. In fact, some even thought it was brutal to keep him on death row – the suspense was bad on his nerves, you know, and he couldn't sleep well at night. There were many people who thought he should have been made more comfortable.

During this time we did not read one article or hear one voice lifted concerning the victims of this criminal. One of the victims, once a beautiful girl, was so abused that after her attack she became a raving maniac in an institution. Her lovely Christian

parents, who chanced to hear a broadcast in which I mentioned the Chessman case, wrote to me about her. Should not her life and the sanctity of that home have been protected? How do you protect it against a criminal like Caryl Chessman? I saw no tears shed for this girl. Why do not some of these softhearted and softheaded folk get interested in the victims? *God* is interested in them. That is the reason He instituted capital punishment!

Change in the New Testament

For the nation Israel, God gave the Mosaic Law (as found in Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy) which interpreted many of the details of the Ten Commandments. He gave to them that which we know today as “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” And we find in the Mosaic Law that the death penalty was invoked. As I’ve already mentioned, in that day capital punishment was by stoning to death. Even in the case of adultery, the adulterer and the adulteress were stoned to death. That is the Mosaic Law.

There are those who say today that, although the Old Testament teaches these things, when you get to the New Testament all of this is changed and you have a different spirit altogether. They are right – it *was* changed. But it was made higher, not lower. Trying to abolish capital punishment by carrying a banner which reads: “Jesus said, ‘Thou shalt not kill’” reveals a sad lack of information and a woeful ignorance of the Word of God. Jesus was talking about individual human life, not capital punishment. Do you want to know what He really said? This is more extreme than anything under the Mosaic system:

Ye have heard that it was said by them of old, Thou shalt not kill and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of judgment; but I say unto you that whosoever is angry with

his brother without a cause shall be in danger of judgment; and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council; but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire. (Matthew 5:21, 22)

That, my friend, is higher than anything ever given under the Mosaic system. Jesus never lowered the Law, nor did He adopt some sentimental notion about this matter.

Jesus gave a parable that I would like you to notice. The parable refers to Himself, and He is making it very pertinent and pointed to the nation Israel.

Then began he to speak to the people this parable: A certain man planted a vineyard, and leased it to tenants, and went into a far country for a long time. And at the season he sent a servant to the tenants, that they should give him of the fruit of the vineyard; but the tenants beat him, and sent him away empty. And again he sent another servant; and they beat him also, and treated him shamefully, and sent him away empty. And again he sent a third; and they wounded him also, and cast him out. Then said the lord of the vineyard, What shall I do? I will send my beloved son; it may be they will reverence him when they see him. But when the tenants saw him, they reasoned among themselves, saying, This is the heir. Come, let us kill him, that the inheritance may be ours. So they cast him out of the vineyard, and killed him. What, therefore, shall the lord of the vineyard do unto them? He shall come and destroy these tenants, and shall give the vineyard to others. [But the crowd listening didn't want the story to end that way.] And when they heard it, they said, God forbid.

(Luke 20:9-16)

Even in that day there were those who opposed capital punishment. They said, "No, not that. You don't mean God would do that?" Yes, if they kill His Son, He will come and destroy them as a nation. And Israel did kill His Son. So did God carry through with His threat? Read their history. In A.D. 70 Titus the Roman came with his army and carried through that execution. He leveled Jerusalem and slaughtered the inhabitants without mercy. God says that He practices capital punishment. When you kill God's Son, when you reject Him, you have to bear your own sins, pay your own penalty, which is what the nation Israel did.

The Christian's Relation to Government

What about the Christian today in his relationship to government? This is, in my opinion, the finest statement we have in the Word of God:

Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God; the powers that be are ordained of God. (Romans 13:1)

You see, the church was never ordained to rule in this world. Our position as a church has always been to be obedient to the ruling power:

Whosoever, therefore, resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God; and they that resist shall receive to themselves judgment. (Romans 13:2)

Now note this:

For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil...
(Romans 13:3)

What a false psychology we have developed in this country, that the police officer is the criminal and the criminal is the hero. The

police officer is to be a *terror* to those who do evil works! When I was just a boy, I swiped apples, and the man who owned the orchard caught several of us fellows in there and called the officer. Do you know that I ran with those fellows five miles up into the Arbuckle Mountains, and I didn't come home till after dark that evening? My dad had been told what we had done, and he was waiting for me. He was the executioner; he carried out the punishment.

The ruler is to be a terror to those who do evil works. There is something wrong when the police force gets to the place where people are not afraid of it.

...Wilt thou, then, not be afraid of the power?...

He is not a terror to those who are doing good or who are not breaking the law.

...Do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same. (Romans 13:3)

Now they do not give me any kind of award at the end of the year when I get through a year without getting a traffic ticket. I don't know why they don't – I think they ought to come out and give me a button or a medal or a placard to attest to the fact that I've been a good driver that year. However, it would be difficult to find a year like that!

Now let's read on:

For he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain; for he is the minister of God, an avenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil. (Romans 13:4)

Our entire psychology is wrong. I believe that when a man does wrong and breaks the law, he ought to be afraid of the police

officer, and he ought to be afraid of the law. The gun is not to be carried as a decoration; the electric chair is not to be used as a cry of "Wolf, wolf!" when there is no wolf. They are to be there as a *terror* to the evildoer. I hope that they will be a terror to the criminal so that we can walk the streets of our cities in safety.

Now let us take a look at our society soon after there was a softening in the public's attitude toward law enforcement. Is there an indication that we are more civilized, more cultured, loving, and refined since the public has changed and no longer believes in capital punishment?

| <u>Year</u> | <u>Number of Executions</u> |
|-------------|-----------------------------|
| 1935 | 199 |
| 1963 | 21 |
| 1964 | 15 |
| 1966 | 1 |
| 1967 | 2 |
| 1968 | 0 |

Do these numbers mean that 1968 was a safe, peaceful, wonderful year of Americans being law-abiding citizens? It was around this time that "law enforcement" became an obscene phrase. And, candidly, crime does pay today. On television it doesn't seem that way – they always manage to get the bad boy and make him pay the penalty. But in our contemporary society, crime *does* pay, and it is paying handsomely. According to the FBI report for 1968, crime nationally increased 17% over 1967. And it has gone up every year since in a most alarming way.

A while back, my daughter and her husband were looking for an apartment in the Washington, D.C., area. One day they came

back rejoicing – they had found a lovely apartment on the first floor at a reasonable rate. The friend with whom they were staying said, “You go immediately and cancel your order for that apartment. The reason it is so cheap is that the first floor is not safe around the Washington area. Every night there’s either a rape or a murder and sometimes both. You don’t stay on the first floor.” That is the capital of our nation!

Every Man Does What He Thinks is Right

We certainly have not improved since the new view of capital punishment came along. I could recite illustrations ad nauseam of how lawlessness is growing by leaps and bounds in this country. Capital punishment is the bedrock of every civilized government; we are a lawless nation without it. We might just as well disband Congress, recall the President, and let every man do that which is right in his own eyes.

Do you know that there was a time when that was done? It is described in the Book of Judges. It was a period characterized by compromise, corruption, and confusion. The record closes with these words:

In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did that which was right in his own eyes. (Judges 21:25)

The lawlessness of the day is the reason Deborah became a judge. As a mother in Israel, she took the lead for the sake of her children. She said:

In the days of Shamgar, the son of Anath, in the days of Jael, the highways were unoccupied, and the travelers walked through byways. (Judges 5:6)

Why did they walk through byways? Because it was not safe to go down the highways in that day. There was no law enforce-

ment, and every man was doing that which was right in his own eyes.

We feel that we have come a long way since those “uncivilized” days, but apparently we are trying to move to that position today. We are moving (I’m not an alarmist, and I do not intend to be sensational) toward an American revolution that bears no resemblance to that of 1775. If the trend continues, the day will have to come when it will be necessary for every man to arm himself and his home for protection.

A Deterrent to Crime

Now, the question is: Does capital punishment deter crime? Taking it down to where most of us live: Is the traffic officer a deterrent to speeding? No question about that! The law enforcement officials have been asked, “On the freeway system, why do you *hide* the traffic officers?” The answer we have been given is: “There are 25,000 off ramps and only a few hundred officers. If you knew where he was, you would speed down through the next few.” And most of us generally do that on the freeways, don’t we? The very presence of that traffic officer (and the fact that you don’t know where he is) makes you a little more careful. It deters me from speeding, and, if you’re honest, you know that is true in your experience. Formerly, the bank robber or the burglar who would come into a home carried an unloaded gun. Do you know why his gun was unloaded? Because all he was after was the loot. He did not want to kill anyone, knowing if he did he would be put to death – and that wasn’t a pleasant prospect. But today he will carry a loaded gun, and he will shoot down anyone. Why? Because he knows that even if he is convicted, some soft judge who is “civilized” and sensitive will sentence him to life imprisonment – and that is all he could possibly get.

When a murderer is sentenced only to life imprisonment, there is not a guard in that prison who is safe. He already has the maximum sentence, and he doesn't mind mowing down any guard who gets in his way. If he is a criminal with those tendencies, no person would be safe who got near him because the law cannot do any more to him, and he knows it. The habitual criminal, if released, knows that if he breaks the law and is picked up again, all he could get is a life sentence. Do you think he would hesitate to shoot down any officer or any person who stood between him and his freedom? May I say to you, this is the reason that today we have so many innocent people shot down in cold blood.

There is an idea abroad that no one should be executed because an execution is not pleasant – it's terrible. I have seen several television shows that have filmed a criminal on death row. Death row is not, I agree, a Sunday school picnic, but I don't think that is the purpose of it. It is not something to be enjoyed! The criminal who has been put there has been put there to be *punished*. (And I can't find anywhere in the Bible where God used punishment as an attempt to rehabilitate the criminal. Nowhere did He ever use that method.) The possibility of having to face capital punishment is meant to be a deterrent to crime.

The Most Famous Trial in History

To conclude, I want to take you to the most famous trial in history – it is not one that is going on now. It is the trial of the Lord Jesus Christ, as recorded in the New Testament.

You will recall that the religious rulers, those bloodhounds of hate, got on His trail very early, and they didn't let up until they folded their hands beneath His cross. They hated Him, and they tried to get a charge against Him. After waiting a long time, the

best they could get was that He had blasphemed. They said, “He has made Himself equal with God.” And, may I say, if He is not who He claimed to be, He *was* guilty of blasphemy, because they understood Him correctly – He was making Himself equal with God. They would have executed Him (which means they would have stoned Him to death), but they were then under the Roman government which forbade the people the use of capital punishment. They had to maneuver so that the Roman government would execute Him, and they had to have a charge that would stick in a Roman court. Since that of blasphemy would carry no weight at all in a Roman court, they began that night to try to work out a charge that would stand before the Roman governor. And their charge was that Jesus had attempted to stir up a rebellion against the Roman government, that He had attempted to set Himself up as a king and intended to establish a kingdom. This would make Him guilty of treason. They brought Him to Pilate, and the charge was made.

Now, Pilate was a puppet of Rome. He had paid a handsome sum for his job. After hearing the charge against Jesus, he obviously wanted to let Him go. But, as you read the record in the Gospels, you have the feeling that Pilate, not Jesus, is on trial. And history has proven this to be accurate. Pilate was on trial. The fact of the matter is that at one point in the trial he called Jesus aside and said in effect, “If You’ll cooperate with me, just deny these silly charges, and I’ll let You go.”

Our Lord wouldn’t do it. And Pilate, in one last fruitless effort, said, “Whom shall I release unto you? Barabbas or Jesus ?” – giving as an alternate the worst criminal they had. At that season, a holiday season, a holy season, it was the custom of the Roman governor to release a Jewish prisoner. Pilate saw this as a way out for himself. To escape condemning an innocent man, as he was

being pressured into doing, he would let the mob get him off the hook. He chose Barabbas because he was absolutely sure they would ask for Jesus to be released since Barabbas was a condemned murderer and criminal. And do you know, that mob began to howl for Barabbas to be released! Pilate was shocked.

Honestly, I have always wondered why they wanted Barabbas to be turned out. He was a hardened criminal, a murderer – so why did they ask for him to be delivered and Jesus to be crucified? I did not understand it until the Chessman case when I saw the howling mob asking for him to be released. And I have seen this same crowd from that day to this asking that criminals be turned loose. Now I know that through propaganda and mob psychology you can get people aroused so they will ask for anything, even that criminals be released. So Barabbas was turned loose.

Why Did God Permit It?

During that terrible time of crucifixion, I'm confident that the disciples said, "He won't die. He'll come down from that cross." And then they heard His frightful, awful cry, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46). These men knew He was innocent, and they could not understand why God had forsaken Him. As I look at that innocent One dying, being executed, I ask myself, *Why in the world did God permit it?* Do you know why God permitted it? Because I happen to be guilty before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ loved me enough to take my place. I haven't seen any softhearted judge or government official offering to take the place of one of these criminals in the gas chamber. So far, none has volunteered. But Jesus Christ volunteered. He came down from heaven for the joy that was set before Him, and He took my place yonder upon the cross. He died in my stead.

In God's sight, I'm as guilty a sinner as was Caryl Chessman. I have the same human nature he had. Nothing but the death of Christ paying the penalty for my sin could spare me from eternal punishment.

The whole plan of redemption is based upon capital punishment.

The soul that sinneth, it shall die. (Ezekiel 18:4)

You can write protests on placards, you can march around heaven's gates all you want to, and you can appeal to the Supreme Court, but you won't change that in heaven. "The soul that sinneth, it shall die." But *He* died for you. He paid the penalty, and you can go free because He loved you. In the Word of God we read:

But there is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared. (Psalm 130:4)

In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace.

(Ephesians 1:7)

Be it known unto you, therefore, men and brethren, that through this man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins. (Acts 13:38)

Don't count on God being softhearted. He does not compromise with evil. God is righteous. God is holy. He maintains His holy government.

God Loves You

But God loves you, and that is the reason He gave His Son to die for you. If there had been any other way, He would have taken it because this way cost Him so much. But He was willing to do it because He loves you.

Have you accepted the forgiveness and mercy that He offers you as a guilty sinner before Almighty God?