

What does Scripture Say about Self Defense?

Introduction

One of the subjects that is frequently discussed among believers is the topic of **self defense**. The basic question that arises about that subject is as follows:

Is there any type of situation, in which it is **permitted** for a believer to use physical force, in order to defend himself (or others) from a *violent* assault?

Of course, as the apostle Paul tells us, Scripture contains all of the information that we need, in order for us to be "trained in righteousness":

2 Timothy 3:16-17 (ESV):

¹⁶ All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷ that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

So, let's investigate Scripture, to determine what it has to say about the subject of self defense.

Explicit Passages about Self Defense

Whenever Scripture is being consulted, about any given issue, it is always best to look for **explicit** statements in Scripture, about the issue in question. That is, we should always look for passages in Scripture which **directly** address the issue – rather than trying to make *inferences* about the issue, from passages that do **not** directly address the issue.

The reason for this, of course, is because explicit statements are “incontrovertible” – that is, they are not “open to interpretation”. On the other hand, inferences can be interpreted, in any way that a person sees fit – so that people can justify almost *any* doctrine by using their own, personal inferences. (Note that the entire doctrine of the Trinity is based upon inferences...)

It turns out that there are some passages in Scripture, which explicitly address the issue of self defense. Two of those passages are described in the next two sections, below.

Explicit Passage #1

First, take a look at the following passage, which directly deals with the subject of self defense:

Exodus 22:2-3 (ESV):

² If a thief is found breaking in and is struck so that he dies, there shall be no bloodguilt for him,
³ but if the sun has risen on him, there shall be bloodguilt for him.

As shown, that passage describes a situation in which a thief breaks in to a house; and then the householder catches the thief in the act, and struggles with him. The passage explicitly states that if the thief ends up getting killed in that struggle, then the householder is **NOT** guilty of murder.

Of course, that passage does *not* state that killing the thief is the “ideal” outcome; but it *does* state that a householder bears **no guilt**, if the thief dies while struggling with the householder. As a result, that passage clearly indicates that a householder is permitted to defend his home, from intruders who break in to it.

The main “confusion” about the above passage regards the “second half” of it. That passage concludes with: “if the sun has risen on him [the thief], then there shall be bloodguilt for him”. Many people believe that this means the following: If the householder catches the thief breaking in during the **nighttime** hours, then the householder is not guilty if the thief dies – but if the thief is caught during the **daytime** hours, then the householder is guilty if the thief dies. That explanation does not make much sense, though, for many reasons. Most obviously, if that is what the passage meant, then it should have started out by saying: “If a thief is found breaking in during the night”. However, the passage does **not** say that – it just says “breaking in” – with no specification about **when** the thief is breaking in.

It turns out that the phrase “sun has risen” is a Hebraic idiom for the *passage of time*. In many cases, when a Hebraic passage refers to the sun rising or setting, it is referring to time passing by. So, in this case, the phrase “if the sun has risen on him” apparently refers to time passing, **after** the thief has broken in to the home. That is, it refers to a point in time after the break-in has occurred.

As a result, it appears to me that that passage states the following (in paraphrase):

“If a householder kills a thief, **while** the thief is **in the act** of breaking in to the householder’s home, then the householder will not be guilty of murder. However, if the householder kills the thief, after the thief has **left** the home, then the householder will be guilty of murder.”

So, from what I can see, that passage states the following: A householder is permitted to defend his home from an intruder, *while* a break in is occurring – and if the intruder ends up dying in the struggle, then the household is **not guilty** of murder. However, a householder is not permitted to “hunt down” and kill an intruder, **after** a break in has occurred. That is, the householder is not permitted to conduct “vigilante” style justice.

In any case, that passage definitely states that we **are** permitted to use force for self defense (and for the defense of our households). So, that passage explicitly allows for the use of force in self defense.

Explicit Passage #2

Now, consider this passage, which also has a direct bearing on the subject of defending ourselves and others:

Deuteronomy 22:23-27 (ESV):

²³ “If there is a betrothed virgin, and a man meets her in the city and lies with her, ²⁴ then you shall bring them both out to the gate of that city, and you shall stone them to death with stones, the young woman because she did not cry for help though she was in the city, and the man because he violated his neighbor’s wife. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.

²⁵ “But if in the open country a man meets a young woman who is betrothed, and the man seizes her and lies with her, then only the man who lay with her shall die. ²⁶ But you shall do nothing to the young woman; she has committed no offense punishable by death. For this case is like that of a man attacking and murdering his neighbor, ²⁷ because he met her in the open country, and though the betrothed young woman cried for help there was no one to rescue her.

The above passage discusses what the punishment will be, if a man has sex with a "betrothed" woman - i.e., a woman who is engaged to be married to someone else. Of course, that sex is considered adultery. The passage makes an *enormous* distinction about the punishment for that sin, based upon **where** the sin occurred. If it occurred in the countryside (i.e., a rural area), then only the man will be executed; but if it occurred in a city, then both the man and the woman will be executed.

The reason for this is that if the sex occurred in a city area, then the woman could have yelled for help, if she had not wanted to have sex – and if she had yelled for help, then she would have been rescued by other people in the city. So, if the sex occurred in a city area, then that implies that the sex was *consensual* – and therefore, the woman is held accountable for it. If it occurred in a rural area, though, then the woman had no possibility of being rescued – so in that case it is assumed that the sex was *not* consensual (i.e., that it was rape).

There is a **very** important “ramification” of the above passage – one that many people miss. As noted above, if a woman is being raped in an urban area, then she has the ability to yell for help – so that she can be rescued from that crime. That, in turn, indicates that if people hear a woman yelling for help, because she is being raped, then they are **obligated** to use force to rescue her. In other words, the above passage tells us that people are **required** to use force, in order to rescue a woman from rape!

Of course, that means that it is *definitely* **permitted** to use force, in order to defend other people. In fact, in this case Scripture tells us that it is actually **mandatory** to use force, to defend a woman from rape.

Common Objections

As noted above, Exodus 22:2-3 and Deuteronomy 22:23-27 directly address the issues of self defense and the defense of others. Those passages *explicitly* state the following:

A householder is **not** guilty of murder, if he kills a thief who is in the act of intruding in his home.

People are **required** to use force, to rescue a woman who is being raped.

Those statements are very clear and explicit – i.e., they are not "open to interpretation". Also, there are **no** explicit statements in Scripture to the contrary – for example, there are no passages which state that a householder **is** guilty of murder if he kills an intruder. So, given that fact, there should not be any “controversy” about the above two statements – because 2 Timothy 3:16-17 tells us that **all** Scripture is inspired by God, and is useful for training in righteousness.

Nevertheless, some groups try to make inferences, based upon *other* passages, to claim that it is **never** permissible for believers to use **any** type of force in self defense – despite the explicit statements listed above. It turns out that the passages which are quoted for those inferences do not actually address the issue of self defense **at all**. In other words, those passages are completely "irrelevant" to the topic of self defense. The sections below describe some of those passages; along with demonstrating that those passages do **not** address the subject of self defense.

Turn the other cheek

One of the most frequently-quoted passages, when discussing the issue of self defense, is the famous "turn the other cheek" passage, in Matthew 5:39:

Matthew 5:39 (ESV):

³⁹ But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.

Some people interpret the above passage to mean that followers of Jesus must **never** use physical force to defend themselves - even if someone is trying to physically harm them.

However, in the ancient Jewish culture, a slap was intended as an **insult** - i.e., it was not intended to physically harm anyone. So, when Jesus tells us to turn the other cheek after a slap, he is evidently telling us to forgive people when they insult us - rather than to "insult the person back". In other words, that passage does not have *anything to do* with self defense – i.e., it does *not* deal with a situation in which a person is trying to harm or kill us.

Love your neighbor as yourself

Another very frequently quoted passage on this subject is the "love your neighbor as yourself" commandment, in Matthew 22:39 and Mark 12:31. Many people believe that that passage completely prohibits **all** use of physical force by Christians - even in self-defense. The basic belief that some people have about that passage can be summed up as follows: "If you love your neighbor, then you will *never* use **any** physical force against him - even if he is trying to murder you".

However, when Jesus gave us that commandment, he was **directly quoting** the Old Testament - to be specific, he was quoting Leviticus 19:18. So, it is very instructive to read through the *context* of that commandment. Here is that passage:

Leviticus 19:17-18 (ESV):

¹⁷ "You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbor, lest you incur sin because of him. ¹⁸ You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.

As shown, that passage is referring to "harboring hatred" towards other people. Basically, that passage tells us that we must not "bear a grudge" against other people - instead, we must *forgive* them for the wrongs that they do to us.

As a result, the "love your neighbor as yourself" command from Jesus does not have anything to do with self defense - instead, it has to do with forgiving people who sin against us.

Blessed are the meek

A third passage that is used to try to make inferences about self defense is the "blessed are the meek" passage, in Matthew 5:5. In our **current culture**, the term "meek" has come to mean someone who is

irrationally submissive – for example, someone who would allow his daughter to be assaulted right in front of him. So, with that definition of "meek", some groups claim that **all** believers must **always allow** themselves (and their families) to be injured and killed by others.

In the **Bible**, however, a "meek" person is someone who is humble – i.e., a person who has a very modest idea about his own importance. That is, in the Bible, a meek person is someone who is not prideful – as opposed to someone who is irrationally submissive. So, the "blessed are the meek" passage does not refer to self defense *at all* - instead, it tells us that we should not be *prideful*.

As a result, the “blessed are the meek” passage also does not have *anything to do* with defending ourselves from a violent attack.

Blessed are the peacemakers

Yet another passage that is quoted on the self defense topic is the “blessed are the peacemakers” passage, from Matthew 5:9. Certainly, it is imperative for believers to make *every effort* to live at peace with everyone else. Unfortunately, in some cases other people **refuse** to be at peace with us. For example, in some cases a person will initiate violence against a believer – *despite* the believer’s best efforts to live peacefully with everyone. As it turns out, the apostle Paul alluded to that *very fact*:

Romans 12:18 (ESV):

¹⁸ If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

That verse acknowledges the fact that in some cases, peace does *not* depend on us – because other people **force** violence upon us, despite our best efforts.

So, the “blessed are the peacemakers” passage tells us that people who make every effort for peace are certainly blessed – but it does not state *anything* about cases in which other people force violence on us. As a result, that passage does not address self defense at all.

Do not repay evil for evil

Finally, Romans 12:14 and 17 are sometimes referenced when discussing the self defense topic. Those verses state the following:

Romans 12:14,17 (ESV):

¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.

¹⁷ Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all.

Those verses specify two basic commands: First, that that we must do **good** to those who *hate* us; and second, that we must **not** take "revenge" against someone who has sinned against us (whether the sin involved violence or not). There are several items to note about those verses. First, many people are unaware that both of the above commandments were **first** mentioned in the Old Testament. Here are two examples of such OT passages:

Exodus 23:5 (NIV):

⁵ If you see the donkey of someone who hates you fallen down under its load, do not leave it there; be sure you help them with it.

Leviticus 19:18 (NIV):

¹⁸ “Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord.

So, Paul was not giving us any “new” information in Romans 12:14 and 17 – instead, he was *reiterating* commandments that had *already* been stated in the Old Testament.

The other item to note is that by definition, taking “revenge” means inflicting harm, in retaliation for a **previous** incident. An example of this is as follows: First, one person harms a second person; and then – at some later point in time – the second person harms the first person, as “revenge” for the initial harm.

The reason why this is important is because the “second half” of Exodus 22:2-3 directly addresses the issue of revenge. As shown above, the first part of that passage states that a householder is not guilty of murder, if he kills a thief while the thief is **in the act** of breaking in to the householder’s home. However, the second part of that passage states that the householder is guilty of murder, if he “hunts down” and kills the thief, **after** the break-in is over.

As a result, Exodus 22:2-3 **agrees** that “revenge” is not permissible. However, that passage *also* states that a householder is permitted to defend his home – with physical force – **while** a break-in is occurring.

Overall, the “do not repay evil for evil” passage prohibits us from taking *revenge* for an injury, **after** the fact - but it does not prohibit us from *defending* ourselves, from an attack that is **currently occurring**. In other words, that passage does not have *anything to do* with self defense.

Conclusion

The overall issue of self defense is rather “theoretical” to believers who live in Western countries – because the vast majority of believers in Western nations will *never* face a violent assault, during their entire lives. Sadly, however, believers in other countries face violent assaults on a *regular basis*. For example, there have been many, *many* documented cases of intruders breaking in to believers’ homes, and raping the women who live in the homes, in many countries around the world.

Given that fact, here is a very poignant question: If an intruder breaks into a believer’s home, and then attacks the believer’s wife to rape her, is the believer permitted to use *physical force* to defend his wife?

According to Scripture, the answer to that question is **yes** – the believer is definitely permitted to use physical force. In fact, in this particular case, Scripture states that it is not just *permitted*, but actually **mandatory** for the believer to use force against the intruder – because Deuteronomy 22:23-27 tells us that people are *required* to use force to rescue women who are being raped.

Even in the above, *extreme* situation, I would say that it is still incumbent on the believer to use as **little** force as necessary, against the intruder. For example, the believer should try to use non-violent force first – to try to *restrain* the intruder, or to drive him away. If that is not possible, then he should try to just

injure the intruder, to *incapacitate* him. Lethal force should always be the absolute last resort – even in extreme cases like this one.

It is important to note, however, that whenever a physical struggle between people takes place, the possibility always exists that a person will end up dying in the struggle – even if the death was not intentional. For example, if a believer is struggling with an intruder to try to restrain him, then the intruder might end up slamming his head against the corner of a table, or slicing his neck on broken glass – and end up dying. In such a case, Exodus 22:2-3 explicitly states that the believer is **not guilty** of murder for killing the intruder.

As mentioned above, the "love your neighbor as yourself" command from Jesus is actually from the Old Testament - that is, Jesus *directly quoted* the Old Testament when he gave us that instruction.

It turns out that there are many other well-known statements in the New Testament - from both Jesus and the apostles - that are **also** taken from the Old Testament. The following post contains some of the more "famous" passages in the New Testament, which are *directly* based on information from the Old Testament:

[Eight "Links" Between the Old and New Testaments](#)