

Ten Commandments E9

Speakers in the audio file: Jon Collins and Tim Mackie

Jon: We're in a series exploring the 10 Commandments, and we're doing them one by one. And we've just finished the first five, which are all about how we relate to God. Today, we'll move on to the last five, which are all about how we relate to others. We'll begin with command number six: "Don't murder." Or, as Tim will want us to translate it, "Don't kill." The Hebrew word is *ratsakh*, which can be premeditated murder, but it can also refer to just accidentally killing someone—what we would call "manslaughter."

Tim: It's a pretty broad word.

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: So I think our English word "kill" is probably the best. It overlaps the most.

Jon: So, don't kill. I mean, of course, murder's wrong, but aren't there times when killing, even though sad and unfortunate, is the right thing to do?

Tim: This is a great example of the Bible as meditation literature. You hear, "Don't kill," there's something intuitive. You're like, "Yeah, that sounds about right." But then you start thinking, "Well, what about in this situation? What about self-defense? What about protecting someone else?" And the biblical authors have already beaten you to the punch. This is going to lead us on a trail that, of course, as always, back to Genesis 1 through, actually, 9.

Jon: The sixth command is a blanket prohibition—don't end a life, because life is of ultimate value in the Bible.

Tim: God is the originator and the giver of life. He fills the world with living creatures. Then God shares that responsibility to care for life, oversee it, with human image. So that's pretty foundational.

Jon: We'll look at the first death in the Bible, which is a murder. Cain becomes jealous of his brother Abel and ends his life. God confronts Cain and tells him that the blood of his brother is crying out from the ground.

Tim: So something cosmic has happened. Human life is an image of God, and it's so precious and valuable that you're causing a rupture in the cosmos to take a human life in an unauthorized way. It's not yours to take.

Jon: We'll also look at how kosher food laws are connected to a deep respect of the life of animals.

Tim: You can take the life of an animal to eat its flesh but not its blood. You got to pour that blood back on the ground. So there's this—this extreme valuing of life. “Every time —”

Jon: Really seriously.

Tim: “—you take the life of an animal and want to eat it, I want you to go through a ritual, a process that will remind you that actually this life isn't yours.”

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: It's God's.

Jon: And we'll look at the inherent paradox of capital punishment in the Bible.

Tim: Capital punishment is allowed for, here, but even capital punishment just sets in motion a cycle of violence. It's like an impossible crisis that drives the biblical story forward. And all of that is taking for granted and driving the rhetoric of the sixth command.

Jon: Don't kill.

Tim: The purpose of God's commands is for life. And the sixth command, here, makes that perfectly clear. It's meant to direct that the best of our thinking, the best of our energies, our greatest wisdom, and moral conviction is most aligned with God when we aim all of that at the preservation and the flourishing of life.

Jon: Today, Tim and I wrestle with the wisdom of the sixth command. Thanks for joining us. Here we go.

[Musical Break (3:29–3:31)]

Jon: Hey, Tim.

Tim: Hello, Jon Collins.

Jon: We're in the 10 Commandments.

Tim: That is what we are doing.

Jon: And today we move into, what are we, five? One, two, three, four, five—fifth command?

Tim: We are doing command six.

Jon: Whoa, we're in six?

Tim: And seven.

Jon: Losing track.

Tim: Yeah, and actually six, seven, eight are the ones that are most easy to remember from the 10 Commandments.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: Don't kill, don't commit adultery, don't steal.

Jon: Yeah, you said these are two words in Hebrew each?

Tim: Each of them is two words in Hebrew. *lo'* is the Hebrew word for "not" or "no."

Jon: Mhm.

Tim: And then it's just the single verb— *lo' tirtsakh*, *lo' tin'aph*, *lo' tignov*.

Jon: No murder, no adultery. No—

Tim: No stealing.

Jon: —stealing.

Tim: No thieving.

Jon: No thieving.

[Laughter]

Tim: Yeah. These three commands—six, seven, eight—are the shortest, and it's a little triad. So we're going to take them in turn, one by one. So we're going to dive into "you will not kill." And even with that translation right there, I've already made a bunch of decisions that we're going to have to talk about.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: So—

Jon: By using the word "kill"?

Tim: By using the word "kill" instead of "murder."

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: Mhm. So it's just a great example of the Bible as meditation literature. It says one thing, then you start to ask questions of it, and you think you're being, like, skeptical or innovative. "What about this? What about that?"

Jon: The "what about this, what about that"—is that the classic, like, "What if you're at war? What if you're—?"

Tim: What about self-defense?

Jon: Uh-huh.

Tim: What about protecting someone else?

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: What about unintentional killing? What about accidents? When you hear, "Don't kill," there's something intuitive. You're like, "Yeah, that sounds about right. Like, that ... don't do that."

Jon: Right.

Tim: But then you start to think, "Well, what about in this situation?" And the biblical authors have already beaten you to the punch. This is going to lead us on a trail that, of

course, as always, is going to lead us back to Genesis 1 through, actually, 9—1 through 9.

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: It is ... this is so rad. In fact, they anticipated all of your questions by addressing them already in the first nine pages of Genesis. The sixth command, *lo' tirtsakh*, "don't kill." It's just the opening of a door into a large, well-designed museum tour through the really complex set of issues around the value of a human life.

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: That's really what we're supposed to—what we're invited to meditate on here is, "What is the value of a human life and why? Why is the human life valuable the way that it is? And how should we respond to that value?" There you go.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: These are the things we will meditate on. But first, how do you render *lo' tirtsakh*?

Jon: In English?

Tim: Into English. Let's start there.

Jon: Okay.

[Musical Break (6:35–6:37)]

Tim: So just a quick survey of contemporary English translations will show an interesting pattern. Almost all of our contemporary English translations render this sixth command as "you shall not" or "thou shalt not murder."

Jon: Murder.

Tim: Murder. New International Version, English Standard Version, New American Standard, New Revised [Standard] Version, Christian Standard Bible. It's just really all the way across.

Jon: Mhm.

Tim: But there's one outlier.

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: One outlier, which is the good old King James. King James went a different route—

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: —going all the way back, like, many centuries, which translates it, “Thou shalt not kill.” So before I tell you what I think is the difference between those two—

[Laughter]

Jon: Between killing and murdering?

Tim: Yeah, because I've given a lot of thought to it, but I'm just curious, like, coming in—coming in cold, when you hear those two English words, “murder” versus “kill,” how would you describe the difference between them?

Jon: Hmm. I think that killing is the more general—making something cease to be alive.

Tim: Yeah, yeah.

Jon: Super general.

Tim: Mhm.

Jon: Murder has the same baseline. You're ceasing something to remain alive.

Tim: Mhm.

Jon: But murder has a connotation to it of, “And you shouldn't have done it.”

Tim: Yeah, yeah.

Jon: Because it's okay to kill your lawn.

[Laughter]

Jon: If you want to plant new lawn.

Tim: Yeah. Sure.

Jon: Right?

Tim: Or, like, dig a French drain in your yard. You're going to have to kill some grass.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Digging it up—

Jon: Have to kill some grass.

Tim: —to get some drainage going. So yeah.

Jon: It's okay to kill some bacteria in your gut if you don't want it there, I guess.

Tim: Mmm. So you're saying "kill" is a little more neutral or—?

Jon: Well, yeah, maybe it's more neutral. I mean, it always feels intense. Killing is—

Tim: Yeah. Yeah.

Jon: Is—there's an intensity to it.

Tim: You're ending—ending the biological vitality, life of something.

Jon: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: But it leaves open, of whether or not it was ... hmm.

Tim: Allowable or whether or not it was okay?

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Mhm. Mhm.

Jon: But murder is saying, “You didn’t have the right to take that life.”

Tim: Yeah. Sure. Sure. So we have kill, murder, slay. So I think slaughter comes from slay.

Jon: Yeah. I think manslaughter feels kind of similar to kill to me.

Tim: Okay. Yeah.

Jon: In a way.

Tim: Yeah. Right.

Jon: Like, yeah, you killed them.

Tim: Yeah. So it’s interesting: Kill can refer to taking human life and any other kind of life—animal life, plant life.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Murder’s reserved for humans.

Jon: Murder’s reserved for humans.

Tim: And I think slay or slaughter.

Jon: You don’t murder your lawn.

Tim: Oh, but slaughter can be for animals or humans.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: But you wouldn’t say you slaughtered the plant. So that doesn’t—

Jon: No, you don’t slaughter plants.

Tim: So you kill humans, animals, or grass. Murder’s only for humans.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: And then slay or slaughter is for animals and humans, but not plants.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: We're just kind of creating a—we could make a little Venn diagram right now—

Jon: Sure.

Tim: —of, like, meaning and overlapping meanings.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: So there's a variety of words in biblical Hebrew for the taking of life. And they all, as you might imagine, have different nuances.

Jon: Right.

Tim: So the one used in the Cain and Abel story, introduced there as *harag*.

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: *Harag*.

Jon: Cain *harag*-s.

Tim: Mhm. Cain *harag*-s his brother. *Harag* is used 160 times in the Hebrew Bible. That comes probably closest to our English definition of murder. So it's unauthorized taking of a life.

Jon: *Harag*.

Tim: Mhm. Ooh, so the verb “to die,” which means the ending of a life, but just on its own, is *mut*. But then you can make that verb causative and say, “Make something die.”

Jon: Mmm.

Tim: We might say “put to death,” “cause the death.” And that's—instead of *mut*, which means “to die”—*hemit*, means to cause the death of somebody.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: Mhm. “To cause the death” is a fairly good way to put it in English, because this can refer to murder sometimes. It can refer to accidental death. It can also refer to authorized death, like capital punishment. And that phrase appears 200 times.

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: So the one used here is *ratsakh*.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: *Lo' tirtsakh*; in the basic form, *ratsakh*. It appears about 46 times in the Hebrew Bible, whereas other verbs for the taking of a human life occur way more often. So the question is, "What does *ratsakh* mean?"

Jon: Okay.

Tim: So let's look at some examples here. First, thinking back to our little Venn diagram in English, *ratsakh* only ever refers to the taking of a human life, not animals'.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: So in that sense, it's not like "kill" in English.

Jon: Or "slaughter."

Tim: Or "slaughter," yeah. Yup. *Ratsakh* can describe premeditated murder. So a well-known story of premeditated murder in the Hebrew Bible is when Ahab sees that this guy who owns some ancestral property right next to his, like, palace—a guy named Navot—has this really nice vineyard. This is in 1 Kings chapter 21. And so with the help of Ahab's wife, Jezebel, they scheme up this plan to get false witnesses to accuse this guy of cursing the name of God. This 1 Kings 21, actually, the whole story is actually working with the 10 Commandments in all these interesting ways. But the word *ratsakh* is used in that story to describe when Ahab took the life of this guy Navot to get his land.

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: But what's interesting is he actually hired two guys to accuse Navot of cursing God's name. And then once he's found guilty of that by the mouth of two witnesses ...

Jon: Then they execute him.

Tim: Then they put him to death.

Jon: Okay. But the word used is *ratsakh*.

Tim: Mhm. And then a prophet goes to meet Ahab and says, "You *ratsakh*-ed this guy."

Jon: Oh, okay. That's what the prophet says.

Tim: Yeah. So it's really interesting, like, it happens by someone else's hand, but yet it's Ahab that's accused of doing the *ratsakh*.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: So clearly meditated, even though his own hand didn't do it.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: So that's interesting. So you can use *ratsakh* to refer to that.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Here's another example. Almost half of the times that *ratsakh* appears, occurs in a very specific place and context, talking about the cities of refuge, where somebody who's killed another person can take refuge.

Jon: Oh, okay.

Tim: That's in Numbers chapter 35, Joshua chapters 20, 21—half of the occurrences of this word occur in those two places in the Hebrew Bible. And so these are cities—six cities in ancient Israel—that were set apart as, like, an asylum type of city.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: And anybody who has taken the life of another person can run there and be protected until, like, an actual, like, judicial process and a hearing can go through a fair trial. Some—that's the basic idea.

Jon: Our version of, "I want to call my lawyer."

[Laughter]

Tim: Yeah. Yeah. That's right. And this is where you flee, because the family member—right?—of the person that just died—

Jon: Is going to exact revenge.

Tim: —is going to come in hot and looking for revenge. So these cities are selected in Numbers 35:11, so that a *rotseakh*, which is the—a noun form of *ratsakh*, the killer—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Who has struck a person unintentionally can flee there.

Jon: Mmm. Yeah, because the point of this place is that it might be that it—you didn't mean to, and maybe you shouldn't be put to death, or it could be that you were framed or something.

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: And so it wasn't a premeditated murder.

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: So *ratsakh* can refer to accidental taking of a life.

Jon: Mhm.

Tim: It can refer to framing someone.

Jon: That ends in them killed.

Tim: That ends in them dying under capital punishment. It's a pretty broad word.

Jon: Mmm. Okay.

Tim: So "murder" doesn't work, I don't think.

Jon: Because?

Tim: Because here in Numbers 35 ...

Jon: Mmm. We wouldn't call that "murder."

Tim: No.

Jon: We'd call that "manslaughter."

Tim: Yes, exactly. Yep.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Yeah. And what Ahab did isn't quite murder because it's setting someone up, framing them, so that they end up dying. So I think our English word "kill" is probably the best. It overlaps the most. Because "kill" can refer to intentional or unintentional.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: And even though in Hebrew, you never *ratsakh* an animal, whereas “kill” can refer to plants or animals or humans.

Jon: Oh, okay.

Tim: But kill’s about our most general word to describe taking the life, but it doesn’t address purpose—premeditated, accidental. It just covers all of them. I think kill’s pretty good.

Jon: Yeah. I hear that. Help me understand this word more, *ratsakh*. Is there any more examples we can see?

Tim: Yeah, there’s 46 examples, in fact. But I think it’s just good to say, in the moment, that to translate it “murder” kind of—

Jon: Yeah, what’s the problem with “murder”?

Tim: —stacks the deck.

Jon: Stacks the deck.

Tim: Yeah. Well ...

Jon: Okay. Well, maybe to say, okay. When I think of “do not murder,” I guess I don’t think of the example of the person who unintentionally did manslaughter.

Tim: Right.

Jon: But you’re saying this word is used in that instance.

Tim: Yes, in fact, in Numbers 35, that’s mostly what it refers to, as somebody who’s—

Jon: That’s the point of that.

Tim: —accidentally taken the life of someone. And “murder” doesn’t mean that.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: But *ratsakh* does mean that.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: And it also can refer to—

Jon: Now, but is that—I guess what I would want to know: Is the Numbers use of *ratsakh*—is that a real baseline use, or is that a more novel kind of use of it?

Tim: Oh, I see. Well, there's a bunch of cases where, actually within Numbers—here, let's just go there. It gives you a bunch of case studies. So Numbers 35:16: Let's say somebody hit someone with an iron tool and that person dies. That person is a *rotseakh*.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: And they must be put to death.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: So basically the idea is, if you've got a hammer in your hand—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: —you know that that's going to kill the person.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: And if you choose to strike with a hammer—

Jon: You're *rotseakh*.

Tim: You're *rotseakh*. Yep. If you strike with a stone large enough that it could kill the person, and they do die, you're a *rotseakh*.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: You're subject to capital punishment.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Let's say you strike with a wooden weapon—

Jon: Yep.

Tim: —and they die. So in all these cases, they're a *rotseakh*, subject to capital punishment. Let's say one guy strikes another guy out of hatred or throws something at him on purpose, and he dies. You're a *rotseakh*, and you're subject to capital punishment. But let's say the person struck them just right in a moment without hating them. They just were—threw something at him, but they didn't mean to.

Jon: Uh-huh.

Tim: And that person dies. Then the community needs to get involved.

Jon: Mhm.

Tim: And then we need to have a—

Jon: And then he calls them something different.

Tim: —trial. But no—

Jon: What's that word there?

Tim: This is the same word, *ratsakh*. The community must—

Jon: Oh, it's—it's rendered different in English.

Tim: Yeah, the community must save the *rotseakh* out of the hand of the avenger of blood.

Jon: Okay. So there it is. It's also unintentional.

Tim: Mhm. Yeah. So it's a good example where *ratsakh* refers to intentional and unintentional.

Jon: That's so interesting. What are you looking at, NIV?

Tim: This is the NET Bible, New English Translation. Yeah, let's see what the NIV, how they do that here.

Jon: Yeah. Murderer, murderer, murderer. That's all intentional. And then it switches to manslayer.

Tim: Manslayer. Yeah.

Jon: But it's the same word.

Tim: It's the same word. Yes, that's right. So in NIV, when it's talking about intentional killing, it translates "murder." When it's unintentional, it translates "manslayer." But when it comes to the 10 Commandments, the NIV chooses "murder" to render, "Thou shalt not murder."

Jon: Because you have to choose one word. So it's interesting. NIV is deciding when I'm in a context where there—where it's obviously murder versus manslaughter, we'll

make the decision. In a situation where it's ambiguous, we're going to not use a more general term to capture the ambiguity. We're going to decide.

Tim: Yeah. In other words, when you translate "don't murder," you're limiting the application of what you think is being referred to. And here's why I think this matters is: Where is this command supposed to send our minds? Is it supposed to send our minds only to premeditated, calculated, like first- or second-degree murder? Or is this command supposed to send our minds on a more cosmic meditation on—

Jon: Just ending someone's life at all, in any way?

Tim: Yeah, what—what really is involved in the ending of a life? And why is it that that should be avoided at nearly every cost? So much so that you could—just a simple command: Don't end a life.

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: Because that is what *ratsakh* means, just ending a life, unrelated to purpose or premeditation.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: So I think we're in the same territory here as Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount: "Do not judge." It's just, blanket command. And it just—you're like, "Whoa."

Jon: Yeah, how's that possible?

Tim: But then he goes on to start qualifying, right?

Jon: Uh-huh.

Tim: Just saying, "Okay, so do you mean never evaluate anybody's choices or behavior at all, ever, under any circumstance?" And then he goes on to talk about situations where you might have to evaluate. But he wants you to—by the shock factor of the prohibition—to step back and to say like, "Whoa, what's that? What's the bigger picture here?"

Jon: Huh.

Tim: And I think something similar is going on here with the use of this word *ratsakh* instead of the word *harag*, "don't murder."

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: So it's rhetoric—a rhetorical overstatement that forces you to start thinking.

[Laughter]

Jon: That's, okay—

Tim: So here, here, I guess here's—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: So let me—remember, there's something very important about the 10 Commands, is that they are closely joined to the 42 that come right after them.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: And what's so interesting is when you get to the 42, there's a whole section of the 42 that starts working with all the qualifications.

Jon: Mmm.

Tim: And all of a sudden it makes you start thinking about, “What is the purpose of that two-word prohibition back there in the 10?” So in the 42 that follow, you have this case law in Exodus chapter 21: “The one who strikes a man so that he dies, that one should be put to death.”

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: So it's not the word *ratsakh*; it's not even the word “murder,” it's just the word “hit.”

Jon: Okay.

Tim: Let's say you hit somebody, and then that person dies? Capital punishment. Whoa.

Jon: Yeah. That's intense.

Tim: That is intense, and you start asking, “Well, what about—what about this? What about that?”

Jon: Okay.

Tim: So verse 13—well, if that guy didn't lie in wait for him, meaning—

Jon: Yeah, like scheme it.

Tim: Yeah, scheme it, but rather—there's a rabbit hole that I'm going to try and gingerly walk around.

[Laughter]

Jon: Okay.

Tim: But let's say God allowed him to fall into his hand.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: In other words, the guy didn't plan it.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: But in the mysterious providence of God, circumstances came together so that an accident, the accidental murder.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: Then I, God, will appoint for you all a place where he may flee. It's referring to the city of refuge.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: But let's say that a man schemes against his neighbor so as to *harag*, murder him by treachery. Yeah. That guy needs to be put to death.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: So you have this general statement—anybody who hits another human, and they die, they should be put to death. So right there.

Jon: Yup.

Tim: You're like, "That sounds like a command."

Jon: Okay.

Tim: But then you have—

Jon: All these qualifications.

Tim: —you have these, immediately these two qualifications. “Well, but if it was unintentional, no. And if it was intentional, yes.” So that’s a pattern set right there.

Jon: Mhm. Okay.

Tim: The baseline is, a human life is not there for you to take.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Apparently, a human life is so valuable that it’s worth this kind of blanket prohibition, even though we know and God knows and Moses knows, there’s going to be all these qualifications.

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: But let’s for a moment forget about the qualifications. Don’t end the life. Don’t do it.

[Laughter]

Tim: In other words, the sixth command is a form of wisdom literature. It’s forcing you to take responsibility for all of the infinite variety of ways where you’re supposed to carry out the value underneath the prohibition.

Jon: Right. Okay.

Tim: But it’s going to look different in every different circumstance.

Jon: Yeah. We’ve always had so much trouble with this as one of the commands, right? Like, because if you’re in the military or if you’re—and you had to go to war, or yeah, what if someone’s trying to kill your family?

Tim: Mhm. Mhm.

Jon: Like, you get to all these scenarios, and you’re like—and you feel all that tension. And if you come to this list going, “This is, like, a definitive list I can just check things off

or not.” Then it—it just feels weird. It’s, like, it feels underdeveloped, but you come to it as wisdom literature ...

Tim: Yes, yeah.

Tim: And then the question is, “Okay, what am I supposed to do?” And you’re saying, from the beginning of this conversation, let’s go to Genesis, and let’s see what the wisdom is.

Tim: Yeah. Where is the first time that the word “life” is used?

[Laughter]

Tim: Let’s start there.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: Because where this is ending is: “Wow, apparently the value of a life is really—”

Jon: Important.

Tim: —important. Yeah. Yeah. So to Genesis 1 we go.

[Musical Break (26:21–26:23)]

Tim: So this very, very simple point to be made: God is the originator and the giver of life, according to the narrative world and claim of Genesis 1. There was lifelessness, darkness, disorder. That’s how the Genesis 1 narrative begins. God brings order in days one through three. And then on days five and six, he fills the world with living creatures. *Khayyot* is the plural “living beings,” but it’s the plural of *khayyah* or *khai*, which means to be alive, living, animal or human life. And then what we’re told on day six is one particular of those *khayyot*, living things, is what’s called *’adam*. And God says, “Let us

make '*adam* in our image, according to our likeness, and let them rule over all." And there's the list of the animals—the fish, the birds, the cattle, creeping things on the land. "Elohim created human in his image. In the image of Elohim, he created him, male and female, he created them. And Elohim blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, fill the land, subdue it, rule over the fish, the birds and the *khayyot*, the living things.'"

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: So life comes from God.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Genesis 2's way of depicting that will be God breathing into the dirt and animating the land with the life of heaven, so to speak, God's own heavenly life.

Jon: And making creatures.

Tim: And making—

Jon: Well, humans.

Tim: Yep. Making humans. But then, here's one particular creature here in Genesis 1 that is among the living things, but then is also, then, called to take responsibility for the life of other living things in the form of ruling and having responsibility for.

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: And that particular creature is called the "image of God," made in the image.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: So that's a little meditation right there.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: All life comes from God.

Jon: And so God has a responsibility over the life.

Tim: So God is, yeah, is responsible for the life. And if God—

Jon: And can rule over the life.

Tim: And can rule directly. But then God shares that responsibility to care for life, oversee it, to a human image. God delegates that care for life. So that's pretty—seems pretty foundational. All life comes from God. And then God shares that oversight and care for life with human image.

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: So it is very interesting, then, that in the garden of Eden story, God is the giver of life. But then, also, if humans prove themselves to be bad partners, God has the prerogative to take away life. Or at least he exiles Adam and Eve from the garden, where they will die. They no longer have access to God's eternal life.

Jon: Mhm.

Tim: So God both gives life, now, and then God can make this call that, "Man, if the humans are going to define good and bad by their own wisdom, they should not have eternal life, access to eternal life if they're in that state."

Jon: So he can take away life.

Tim: So he exiles them. And even though he doesn't kill them on the spot, as it were, he does banish them to the place where they will eventually die.

Jon: Mhm.

Tim: So the biblical authors take for granted that it is God's prerogative alone to give and to take away life and that human images can be delegated to care for life. That sends your mind, "Well, maybe human beings could be delegated to take away life?"

Jon: Sure.

Tim: It doesn't say that.

Jon: It doesn't say, but it does say—what's the word, a "subdue"?

Tim: Oh, yeah, subdue, that's right.

Jon: In my mind, subduing can get kind of ...

Tim: Yeah. It's anticipating that there'll be a hostile confrontation from some of the animals, like a snake, for example.

Jon: Yeah. But it doesn't necessarily anticipate that you're going to have to hurt other humans.

Tim: No, there it's in relationship to the animals.

Jon: It's in relationship to the animals.

Tim: Yeah, that's right. Yeah. So God can give life; God can take away life. Humans are called to care for life.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: But that's where the story is so far.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: Okay. Next story, Cain and Abel, which incidentally, it's all about taking of life.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: So you have a brother, he's angry, and God says that, "You have a choice between doing good and not doing good." This is Genesis chapter 4, verse 7. "If you do good, Cain, if you're angry, won't there be exaltation lifting up for you? If you do not do good, but be careful, because sin is like a croucher, and it desires you, but you can rule it."

Jon: Mmm. Like all the creatures—

Tim: Like all.

Jon: —you're supposed to rule.

Tim: Yes, now you've got this angry impulse against your brother, and you need to rule over it, just like a hostile animal.

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: And might threaten your community, your village, your children, even though it doesn't have them yet.

[Laughter]

Tim: So obviously, Cain doesn't do good. He gives in to sin, because he murders his brother. God comes to Cain and says, "Hey, where's your brother?" And Abel [*sic*] says, "What? Am I the keeper of my brother?" Which, implied there is, "Am I responsible for

him or his life, really?” And very clearly, God assumes that a brother is responsible for the life of his brother, because he—he goes on and says, “What have you done? The voice of the spilled blood, shed blood of your brother is crying out to me from the ground.” So something cosmic has happened, where the return of his brother’s blood to the ground by his own hand—instead of caring for the life of his brother, he’s taken the life, and he’s returned that human life to the ground but in an unauthorized way. It’s not cool.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: You just broke the cosmos. You just broke the system.

Jon: The blood—you broke the cosmos.

Tim: Mhm.

Jon: You’re saying this phrase, “the blood crying out from the ground,” is a phrase that makes you think, “You broke the cosmos.”

Tim: You just, yeah. Yup. Like, the universe is designed to work a certain way. Life is a precious gift from God.

Jon: The blood represents the life.

Tim: The blood is the life.

Jon: And so the life is meant to be in you.

Tim: In you.

Jon: You’re supposed to have the life.

Tim: In your body.

Jon: If the life is spilled out into the ground, now the ground has the life.

Tim: Yup.

Jon: You don’t have the life—you’re dead.

Tim: Yup.

Jon: And so there’s this turn of phrase, the blood now is crying out from the ground.

Tim: It’s crying out. It’s your accuser.

Jon: It's accusing the murderer, saying, "This is not okay."

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: "I'm supposed to be alive."

Tim: You didn't have the authority to do that.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: You didn't give life to your brother. God did.

Jon: Mmm.

Tim: You can't just take the life of another human, like it's yours to take. It's not yours to take.

Jon: And the crying out means not just accusing but kind of saying, "Something's wrong now."

Tim: Yeah. That's right. So within the narrative world of Genesis 1 through 4, God's the giver of life. Human life is an image of God. And it's so precious and valuable that you're actually rupturing—you're causing a rupture in the cosmos to take a human life in an unauthorized way. It's not yours to take. Hmm.

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: So what's interesting is, Cain begins a spiral of violence that continues on through his descendant, Lamech, who starts, like, glorifying violent taking of life. And then that leads to the whole debacle with the Nephilim and Genesis 6. And what results from all that is violence in the land, in Genesis 6, and innocent blood crying out to the ground, from the ground to God.

Jon: The picture is that this is normalized now.

Tim: Mhm. That's right.

Jon: People are just saying, "It's not a big deal. We just kill each other."

Tim: That's right. Point is, taking of human life starts becoming the norm.

Jon: That's the norm.

Tim: In a post-Cain world.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Cain sets in motion a degrading trend.

Jon: Life is a battlefield at this point.

Tim: Yeah. That's right. Yeah. And for L—a guy named Lamech, personal honor and status is just as valuable, if not more valuable, than another person's life. So you slap me, you wound me, I chop your head off.

Jon: Mhm.

Tim: That is true in many traditional honor-shame cultures throughout history.

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: And think, if you're generations into a culture where personal honor is more valuable than your—anybody's—life, then it actually becomes reasonable to take your own life if you have been dishonored.

Jon: Oh.

Tim: It becomes reasonable to take another person's life—

Jon: If they dishonor you.

Tim: —if they've dishonored you. Yeah.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: So when we see the scaling of violence that leads up to the flood, it's in the model of Lamech.

Tim: Yeah. Yeah.

Jon: Who's saying, "If you dishonor me, I take your life."

Tim: Yeah. That's right.

Jon: And that logic or that kind of way of living, scaled up, just makes things get out of control.

Tim: Yeah. That's right.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: So after the flood, where God purifies the land from all this spilled blood, and Noah and his sons get off the boat, and their wives and his wife, and God says to them, “Be fruitful and multiply.” But then there’s this whole little set of qualifications that God gives, because now humans are in the habit of taking the life of creatures and of other humans.

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: So the first thing that God does with Noah is modify the vegan diet of Eden, and says, “Okay, now the creatures, the birds and the fish and the ground creepers, they’re in your hand to eat for food, just like I gave you the plants in the garden of Eden.”

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: So it’s like a concession—God makes a concession.

Jon: You can eat the animals now.

Tim: Mhm. Yup. However—and here’s the concession—verse four: “You cannot eat the flesh of another creature if its life blood is still in the veins. You cannot. The blood”—so we’re back to thinking about the blood, like we did with Cain and Abel. Then, well, no lines, maybe. I don’t know, it depends on how well-known. God says, “Indeed, I will require your lifeblood, from every beast I will require it, and from every human, from a man’s brother, I will require the life of a human.” So if you take the life of an animal, or if you take the life of a human, God will come looking for you, just like he did with Cain.

Jon: Wow.

Tim: So if an animal takes the life of another human or animal, or if a human takes the life of another human or animal, you’re accountable to God for that: “From every beast, I will require it, and from every human, and from a man’s brother, I will require your lifeblood.”

Jon: If you take ...

Tim: Yeah, the general idea, I think, is that—here’s the thing, humans are violent. You’re going to kill each other, and you’re going to kill animals to eat them, but I want you to know something. Any time a life is taken, human or animal, God’s paying attention. God will require it, and that’s a dense phrase, and we don’t have time to go down a full study of it, but the point is God will show up, he’s paying attention, any time a living creature’s life is taken.

Jon: Okay, so you can eat animals.

Tim: Mhm. Yeah.

Jon: But not the blood.

Tim: Don't eat the blood.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: Yeah. You got to pour it out.

Jon: Yeah. Okay.

Tim: You got to pour out the blood.

Jon: And then it says, "I will require your lifeblood."

Tim: Mhm.

Jon: What does that mean, "I will require your lifeblood"?

Tim: Mhm. If you take the life of another creature, there'll be some accountability. "I will require your lifeblood." I think it's implied, if you take it illegitimately, or if you devalue. So we haven't finished reading. In classic, biblical kind of meditation literature style, the main point is saved for the end.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: Which is this: "The one who pours out the blood of a human, by a human his blood will be poured out." Why? "Because in the image of God, he made '*adam*,' humanity. So the life and the lifeblood of any creature, human or animal, is of ultimate value to God. God's paying attention.

Jon: Mhm.

Tim: And if you illegitimately take the life of an animal or a human, because basically the flesh with its life and its blood, you will not eat. So this is actually the foundation of the kosher food laws that'll get developed in Leviticus.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Which says—

Jon: So you've already killed the animal.

Tim: That's right.

Jon: So the life of the animal has been taken.

Tim: Mhm. Mhm.

Jon: So now it's "honor the life of the animal; don't eat its blood."

Tim: That's right.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: But then you said—

Tim: Because blood is the life. Yeah. So let's flip it over. I think the logic underneath this is, God is the giver of life. And we've already established that it's not a human's prerogative, based on their own desire or honor-shame system, to take the life of another human.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: It's not okay. And if you take the life of another creature, you stand before God for it. If it's the life of an animal, you can do that if you want to, but you have to honor its blood, return it to the ground from which it came. Then, verse five and six, I think, go on to talk about that, even though you can kill and eat an animal—just so they were clear—like the lifeblood of any creature, it's mine. It's God's. God will hold you accountable for acting like you have the authority to take the life of another creature.

Jon: I will hold you accountable for murder. So—

Tim: Mhm.

Jon: That's what "require your lifeblood" means.

Tim: Yeah. Yes.

Jon: Hold you accountable for murder.

Tim: Yes. And you'll be accountable for murder if you kill an animal and then, like, consume its blood.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: Because you are acting like God, like you can just take the life of another animal. Now God says you can take the life of an animal to eat its flesh but not its blood. You got to pour that blood back on the ground and give it back to the ground from which it came. So there's this—this extreme valuing of life as a principle of the life of animals and humans.

Jon: So you're saying that extreme value of life first showed up as, "You actually don't have the right to eat an animal."

Tim: Yeah. In Eden. That's right.

Jon: In Eden, it didn't say it explicitly.

Tim: Mhm. Yeah.

Jon: But it's "eat the fruit."

Tim: Eat the fruit; eat the plants.

Jon: Eat the plants; rule the animals.

Tim: Mhm. Yeah.

Jon: And when Noah gets off the ark, you get this pretty strange concession where God says, "Okay, about the animals, you can eat them now."

Tim: Mhm. Yeah.

Jon: Which makes, just right there, you're like—

Tim: Whoa.

Jon: Okay, we weren't eating animals. That wasn't the point, to eat the animals.

Tim: Mhm. Yeah, ruling animals, according to Genesis 1, did not involve being able to eat them.

Jon: The life of animals are really important.

Tim: Mhm.

Jon: Extremely important.

Tim: Life is important.

Jon: Life—because life is important.

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: The life of, specifically, creatures here.

Tim: Mhm.

Jon: And blood, the blood of animals, the blood of humans, is their life.

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: We know that from the Cain story.

Tim: Yup. Liquid life.

Jon: Liquid life.

Tim: Mhm.

Jon: Okay, so when we get to this concession, what God's telling Noah: "We can eat the animals now, but man, take this seriously."

Tim: Mhm.

Jon: Right? That's what we're supposed to get?

Tim: Mhm.

Jon: Because you're taking the life for your own benefit.

Tim: Mhm.

Jon: And you're stepping into territory that's very ... "That's my territory."

Tim: Yeah. Yeah. That's God's territory. Because God is the author of life. The giver.

Jon: Humans aren't supposed to be the ones who can just decide when life ends for something else.

Tim: Yeah. Human or animal.

Jon: Human or animal.

Tim: Yes, that's right.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: However, God knows that humans are both violent and that they want to eat flesh. So he makes this concession, but then even in the concession, he creates, like, a ...

Jon: Take the life of this animal really seriously.

Tim: Every time you take the life of an animal and want to eat it, I want you to go through a ritual, a process, that will remind you that actually—this life isn't yours.

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: It's God's.

Jon: Okay. That's the "not eating the blood of the animal."

Tim: Yup. That's right.

Jon: And this "indeed, I will require your lifeblood" as saying, like ...

Tim: Yeah, if you take the life of an animal and eat its blood, you are acting like it was your life to take. It was yours to take.

Jon: And that will require your life.

Tim: And that is akin to taking the life of a human. And for taking life of a human, the one who pours out the blood of a human by a human, his blood will be poured out. And then, what's the ground for all of this? What's underneath all of this? Is that in the image of God, he made human. So humans are called to rule and care for life on God's behalf. And if you selfishly appropriate the life of an animal and act like you're God over it, not cool. God will require your life for that. And if you, certainly, do that for another human image of God—but notice there's a paradox here.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: The one who pours out the blood of a human—that is, who murders the human—by a human, his blood will be poured out. You will be put to death by another human. But then, that human who takes the life of a human as, like, a just response will then be responsible, right?

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: It sets up almost this little circular paradox, where now humans are just going to become endlessly responsible for this cycle of violence.

Jon: Hmm. Yeah.

Tim: It's almost like an impossible scenario. Human life is so valuable, humans should never take a life. But to enforce that very point, capital punishment is allowed for here. But even capital punishment is qualified, because it just sets in motion the cycle.

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: That's really fascinating.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: It's almost like, if you want to make your bed, so to speak, on a cycle of violence—on one sense, a cycle of violence, like capital punishment, upholds something. Capital punishment communicates something. It communicates that it's not okay to take a human life. But it also defeats itself, because you're taking human life to make the point that you—it's not our right, prerogative, to take human life.

Jon: Isn't the logic of capital punishment, like, if you take someone's life, how could you ever repay them?

Tim: Mmm. Hmm.

Jon: There really is no way to repay them.

Tim: Mmm.

Jon: The only really equitable thing is, you forfeit your life.

Tim: Right.

Jon: But then you're saying, now we're in this paradox of, okay, once you force someone to forfeit their life, well, now you've taken their life.

Tim: Now you've taken—now you've taken their life.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Yes.

Jon: And now you're responsible for their life.

Tim: Right.

Jon: And so, right in this law of retaliation, capital punishment, is, like, a bug that's going to, like, just create all these problems.

Tim: Yes. Yeah, that's right. Yup. So Patrick Miller, who I learned a lot from on the 10 Commandments, Hebrew Bible scholar, he names it this way. This is helpful. He says, "The tension of God's blessing of life and the warning of God's authority to take life through capital punishment is now remains within the human community." So God's the giver of life—this is me qualifying or commenting on Miller's comment—God's the giver of life, and only God has authority to take life. So that's the tension right there, even within, like, God's own responsibility of creation. And now God's giving over that responsibility to the human community. Miller goes on, "The rule of God over life is so clear and the value of life is so high that nothing except a human life can compensate for it."

Jon: Mmm.

Tim: "But in such an act, however, the community, which we know is going to be fallible in its procedures of justice, the community is always at risk of violating the first part of the tension, which is the sacred value of life. The text goes as far as one can in Scripture in asserting the possibility of a legitimate taking of life through judicial procedure. But it does so within the context of God's instruction that goes as far as it can in protecting human life."

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: "The text doesn't give attention to the problems always present in a community's decision to take a life for a life that's been taken. And so the community has to face the thorny question of deciding on which side of the tension it'll come down." So what he's trying to name is that there's this inherent paradox within the sacred value of human life. And then the taking of a life as a just demonstration of the value of human life.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: And that, in a way, this becomes like a little infinity loop. As I've reflected on this, this is a part of the tension driving the biblical story forward in a crisis of, how do you both honor the sacred nature of God's life that God wants to destine his human images towards eternal life? But yet to enforce and communicate that value, if somebody—right?—is careless with a human life, the only way to really communicate that is to take a human life, which, it's kind of like, "Well, what's the way forward, then?"

Jon: Mhm.

Tim: I guess the way forward would be, if you could surrender a life that truly isn't able to be conquered by death, I guess you'd be able to solve the riddle. I'm kind of pointing way forward here and quickly to the story of Jesus.

[Laughter]

Tim: But you're setting up a problem here.

Jon: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Tim: In that—in—

Jon: I think I'm beginning to appreciate the problem in a new light, that this passage is, in a very forceful way, is making you reckon with the fact that all life, human and animal, is of this utmost value.

Tim: Mhm.

Jon: So like, if you're going to start eating animals, like, this is serious business, because life is so, so important.

Tim: Yes.

Jon: So much so, then when you get to human life, now, it's like, "How much more important it is to respect the life of a human." And so what becomes kosher law is embedded in it, this deep, deep respect and honor for the life—

Tim: Of an animal.

Jon: —of another animal. So much so that there's this phrase that I'm still just trying to reckon with, where God says, "I will require your life." By the way you mistreat—

Tim: Another life.

Jon: —even animals.

Tim: Animal life, yeah. Yeah.

Jon: I mean, there, I feel like I just need to stop and like—

Tim: Yeah. Go for a long walk.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Evaluate.

Jon: I don't think I've really come to terms with that, actually.

Tim: Mhm. Mhm.

Jon: So that's throwing me for a loop.

[Laughter]

Tim: Mmm. Good, well, I mean, I think probably it's supposed to, yeah, it's supposed to get in our face.

Jon: It's getting in our face, saying, "This is how important life is."

Tim: Yes, yeah.

Jon: Even animal life.

Tim: Mhm.

Jon: Like, take that really, really seriously. So like, we've just ramped up the value of life, like, as high as we could go.

Tim: Mhm.

Jon: And then this is a puzzle. What do you do when someone violates that?

Tim: Yeah. Yeah.

Jon: When someone, like, just takes someone's life for shaming them or decides, "Your life's not important, I'm going to take it."

Tim: Mhm.

Jon: If life is that extremely valuable, what is there to do in that situation with that person?

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: That person is going to create chaos in our communities.

Tim: Mhm.

Jon: That person also has just done something that is, just, cosmically violating.

Tim: Mhm.

Jon: And so the only, like, logical thing is, that person has forfeited—

Tim: Their right to live.

Jon: —their right to be part of this whole thing.

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: They can't have the life anymore.

Tim: They can't—yeah. Yup.

Jon: Okay. Well, then, who's going to exact that?

Tim: Who's—yeah. Who's going to carry that out?

Jon: Who's going to carry that out?

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: Because when you carry that out, well, now, you're back in the exact same situation of—well, but that person's life is still their life.

Tim: That's right.

Jon: That's still life.

Tim: That's still life. Yup.

Jon: They forfeited it, but, like, it's still life.

Tim: Yeah. Yeah.

Jon: And so, man, be careful.

Tim: That's right.

Jon: What—what you're saying is—is implicit in this is like, “Man, that’s a dangerous game to play of, like, now taking that person’s life.”

Tim: Mhm. And humans are well into playing that dangerous game full-on by this point in the biblical story.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: And so that’s why I was using the infinity loop or the—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: It’s like an impossible crisis that drives the biblical story forward, that whatever is going to have to happen now, humanity has forfeited its right to live. But yet, God is the one who has declared that animals and humans should live.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: And that all of that is taking for granted and driving the rhetoric of the sixth command: *Lo’ tirtsakh*, “don’t kill.”

Jon: There’s something so foundational and important and valuable about life.

Tim: Mhm. Yeah.

Jon: That the baseline is, you do not take it.

Tim: Do not do it.

Jon: You don’t cause it to stop being life.

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: Life is life.

Tim: Yeah. Yeah. And—

Jon: Let life be life.

Tim: That’s right. And after the 10 Commandments come the 42, which is going to qualify that in all these ways that are important. And so maybe it’s just good to say, you and I are not, in this moment, trying to make official declarations about the legitimacy of capital punishment or ...

Jon: Right.

Tim: We're just trying to meditate on these texts.

Jon: Or when you can defend some—your family, or ...

Tim: That's right. That's right.

Jon: What does it mean to be a soldier? And all that stuff.

Tim: Yeah. That's downstream. And you got to think that through. Like, we all have to think those questions through in our communities, in our context.

Jon: But as you think those things through, you're confronted with what feels like this real riddle and this pretty exacting charge, which is: Life of all creatures is so valuable. And then human life, that's made in the image of God.

Tim: Mhm.

Jon: And there's even something more cosmic, there.

Tim: Yeah. That's right.

Jon: And you just don't mess with it.

Tim: Yeah. It's not yours to take. Yeah.

Jon: And so when you start from there, then you kind of with, like, trepidation and real kind of somberness kind of start to think, "Well, then what does it mean to eat an animal? And even more so, what does it mean to hold someone accountable to murder?"

Tim: Mhm.

Jon: "What does it mean to protect my family? What does it mean?" Like, how am I really going to reckon with this?

Tim: Mhm. Hmm. So maybe a good way to land the plane on this conversation, but not on the issue.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Because the issue is one that all of us have to be thinking about all the time for the rest of our lives, is that this is the sixth command. And the theme—mini theme study we did of God's commands, lead—you know, as the frame leading up to the 10 Commandments is: God's commandments are for life. Like, life is actually one of the

key words used connected to the purpose of God's commands, is to protect and preserve the life of the one to whom God commands, and then also to avoid the things that will lead to death. The purpose of God's commands is for life. And the sixth command here of the 10 just makes that perfectly clear. It's meant to direct that the best of our thinking, the best of our energies, our greatest wisdom and moral conviction is most aligned with God when we aim all of that at the preservation and the flourishing of life.

Jon: Hmm. Yeah.

Tim: You know that you are close to the heart of God and the purpose of God, if your actions are aimed at preserving and making life flourish. And maybe that's—that very open-ended, positive value is maybe just a good place to end our meditations. Because in a way, that just opens up a whole human life as to how you do that. And that is the purpose, I guess, of these commands. It's to point us towards life and wisdom.

Jon: Thanks for listening to this episode of BibleProject podcast. Next week, we'll look at the seventh commandment, "Do not commit adultery," which leads us to a deeper conversation about the meaning and value of marriage.

Tim: Marriage is a symbol of the creator's relentless focus, love, and loyalty towards creation. God has a lot of ways that he could express his creative potential, but that he would relentlessly commit himself to the dirt creatures and pursue them, to love them as God loves God's own self. That's what a human marriage is meant to symbolize.

Jon: BibleProject is a crowdfunded nonprofit, and we exist to experience the Bible as a unified story that leads to Jesus. Everything that we make is free because of the generous support of thousands of people just like you. Thank you so much for being a part of this with us.