

## Chapter 2 What does Scripture say?

Guards in the sanctuary?! Who would consider such measures? How about Moses, “*There were 8,600, keeping guard over the sanctuary,*” (Num. 3:28). However, just about any case can be made from Scripture, especially when using only a single verse. Throughout the two thousand years of Church history popes, priests, pastors, and professors have all made cases from Scripture, yet often came to different conclusions from the same text. As a pastor and Christian college professor my goal is to present a right view of Scripture.

To be frank, nowhere does the Bible say explicitly, “A local church shall have an armed security team.” Neither does the Bible say, “A local church shall *not* have an armed security team.” While there are many things the Bible speaks to directly and unequivocally it doesn’t specifically address armed security teams in a local church or faith-based organization. So what do we do? We look to biblical principles. The question isn’t, “Did Jesus say to protect a local New Testament church with armed guards?” The question is, “What is the overarching witness of Scripture concerning self-defense or defense of another using lethal force?”

### ***Joshua fights with the sword***

*“Then Amalek came and fought with Israel at Rephidim.”  
(Exodus 17:8)*

It was less than three months since Moses led Israel out of Egypt. Following ten devastating plagues, Israel was finally free and safely across the Red Sea while Egypt’s army died in a watery grave. But Egypt’s army wasn’t the last threat Israel faced. After crossing the Red Sea Israel encountered three life-threatening dilemmas, two dealt with water, one with food. In each incidence the Lord miraculously provided for his people. The Lord cured non-potable water with a stick, provided daily manna from Heaven, and caused water to come from a rock.<sup>1</sup>

After the Lord demonstrated his ability to provide for and sustain his people against the brutal desert elements, Israel rested at Rephidim. Rephidim was the last stop before Mt. Sinai, where they would worship God and receive further instruction from him.

*Rephidim* means rest or resting place.<sup>2</sup> While at this resting place, Israel is attacked by the Amalekite army. “*Then Amalek came and fought with Israel at Rephidim*” (Exod. 17:8). Israel was at a place of rest when attacked. This was a first for Israel. While living in Egypt as slaves for the last 400 years she fell under their protection. But Egypt wasn’t there to protect her anymore. Even in bondage there’s a certain amount of security. In Egypt, while not free, they had food, water, and the protection of the Egyptian army. When they chose to follow the Lord they lost all that Egypt provided, exchanging it for what the Lord promised. So it should be no surprise that an attack came.

But didn’t the Lord promise they wouldn’t be attacked? Couldn’t he have prevented an attack? No, the Lord never promised they wouldn’t be attacked; and yes, he could have prevented it, but didn’t. The Lord promised salvation. He promised deliverance. He promised to be with them. The Lord never promised his people protection from the harm sin brings as they journeyed to the Promised Land.

---

<sup>1</sup> (See Exod. 15:22-27; 16:1-8; 17:1-7)

<sup>2</sup> (Blue Letter Bible, n.d.)

Israel was in a position of vulnerability simply because she followed the Lord's leading. That's when Amalek attacked. The Amalekites were a nomadic people that traveled about attacking and looting nations. The Amalekites had domesticated the camel and used its speed to ambush unsuspecting victims, relieving them of their possessions.<sup>3</sup> Israel should have been easy prey for these Amalekites, who were skilled in warfare.

The Amalekites had learned where Israel was camped and threatened to attack a people unskilled in warfare. What would Israel do? Israel had been slaves, not soldiers. They were brick-makers, not warriors. They were shepherds, not combatants. Word had spread that Israel had left Egypt with a large bounty and no army making them an easy target for Amalek.

So, what did Israel do? Throw her hands up in surrender? Compromise in an attempt to make peace? Turn tail and run? No, she stood and fought. *"So Moses said to Joshua, 'Choose for us men, and go out and fight with Amalek'"* (Exod. 17:9a). *"So Joshua did as Moses told him [emphasis added], and fought with Amalek"* (Exod. 17:10a). *"And Joshua overwhelmed Amalek and his people with the sword"* (Exod. 17:13).

Amalek was defeated "with the sword." Why didn't the Lord protect Israel with a miracle? Why didn't the Lord confuse the Amalekites like he would the Syrian army years later? Why? The text doesn't say, but we know this, God used his people to protect themselves with the common weapon of combat: a sword.

### ***David guarding the sheep***

*"Choose a man for yourselves, and let him come down to me. If he is able to fight with me and kill me.... But if I prevail against him and kill him...."*  
(1 Samuel 17:8-9)

One of the most famous stories in the Bible is David's defeat of Goliath with a stone from a sling. The sling, like the modern day handgun, was a common handheld weapon used for self-defense, hunting, and close combat.<sup>4</sup> In the hands of a skilled slinger these were deadly weapons.<sup>5</sup>

Israel and the Philistines were at a standstill the Philistines wanted Israel to either send out a champion to fight against their giant or surrender. That was when a young shepherd named David arrived on the scene. And just as he had done previously, Philistine giant Goliath taunts and challenges Israel's army to send a man to fight him. David immediately goes on the offensive. *"David said to the men who stood by him, 'What shall be done for the man who kills this Philistine and takes away the reproach from Israel?'"* (1 Sam. 17:26a). David pulled no punches. But none of Israel's soldiers stepped forward to fight the giant. One of those unwilling soldiers was Eliab, David's brother who responds, *"Why have you come down? And with whom have you left those few sheep in the wilderness? I know your presumption and the evil of your heart, for you have come down to see the battle"* (1 Sam. 17:28b). However, David didn't give in, because he knew he was on the side of right. God's people were being threatened by the arrogant Philistine giant and Israel's king and army weren't willing to fight, but David was. David said to King Saul, *"Let no man's heart fail because of him. Your servant will go and fight with this Philistine"* (1 Sam. 17:32).

---

<sup>3</sup> (Stuart, 2006, p. 393)

<sup>4</sup> (2 Chron. 26:14)

<sup>5</sup> (1 Chron. 12:1-2)

Now David wasn't a soldier he was a shepherd. He'd never been in battle, nor trained in hand-to-hand combat, and he was young. Goliath was a trained and proven warrior. Saul warned him, "*You are not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him, for you are but a youth, and he has been a man of war from his youth*" (1 Sam. 17:33). David responded, "*Your servant used to keep sheep for his father. And when there came a lion, or a bear, and took a lamb from the flock, I went after him and struck him and delivered it out of his mouth. And if he arose against me, I caught him by his beard and struck him and killed him*" (1 Sam. 17:34-35). David had skills to protect his father's sheep from a deadly predator attack and he saw Goliath as the lion or bear; a predator. "*Your servant has struck down both lions and bears, and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be like one of them, for he has defied the armies of the living God*" (1 Sam. 17:36). I wonder if Saul read between the lines. Did he realize David not only compared Goliath to a lion or bear, but he also compared Israel's army to sheep?

David was a shepherd and his job was to protect the flock. He saw Israel's army as sheep that were paralyzed by the threats of a giant predator. Not only did David have the will and the skill he also believed, "*The LORD who delivered me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine*" (1 Sam. 17:37a).

David didn't propose a prayer meeting to decide what to do. David didn't presume if they talked to the Philistines something could be worked out. David knew immediate action needed to be taken. Goliath threatened violence and David proposed to respond with violence. King Saul said, "*Go, and the LORD be with you!*" (1 Sam. 17:37b). David did go. "*So David prevailed over the Philistine with a sling and with a stone, and struck the Philistine and killed him,*" (1 Sam. 17:50). Why didn't David attempt to reason with Goliath? Why didn't David try to make peace? Because it was not the time. David's son Solomon would later write, "*For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven... a time for war, and a time for peace*" (Ecc. 3:1, 8b).

### ***Nehemiah—armed and ready***

*"The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire."  
(Nehemiah 1:3)*

Nehemiah led a contingent of Jews to Jerusalem to rebuild the city's walls that were broken down years earlier when Nebuchadnezzar had attacked the city and forced Judah into Babylonian exile. For nearly 150 years the walls lay in ruin. The walls of a city was its protection against attack. A city without walls was a defenseless city. A city without walls was a vulnerable city. A city without walls was at the mercy of any army that wanted to attack. God's people were vulnerable to physical assault. We read, "*As soon as I [Nehemiah] heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven*" (Neh. 1:4). Nehemiah understood the implications of an unprotected people in a hostile environment.

Jerusalem needed her walls rebuilt and Nehemiah was called by God to lead in the rebuilding. Nehemiah, although a Jew, was an official in the court of the Persian king Artaxerxes. After securing permission from Artaxerxes, Nehemiah made the trip to Jerusalem and rallied the Jewish people to begin the rebuilding effort. But there were enemies of the Jews that didn't want the walls restored, the Bible records that "*it displeased them greatly that*

someone had come to seek the welfare of the people of Israel” (Neh. 2:10b). Imagine that! There are those who don’t want God’s people to be safe.

Three enemies are named in Nehemiah chapter two: Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem. When they heard of Nehemiah’s plans they asked, “*What is this thing that you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king?*” (Neh. 2:19b). Nehemiah’s replied, “*The God of heaven will make us prosper, and we his servants will arise and build, but you have no portion or right or claim in Jerusalem*” (Neh. 2:20). Nehemiah’s default response to adversity was prayer and faith.

Prayer and faith. Two foundational tenants of God’s people not only in the Old Testament, but in the New as well. Paul writes in Philippians, “*Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God*” (Phil. 4:6). That’s what Nehemiah did first—he prayed to God. Second, he expressed faith that God “will make us prosper.” Faith is pleasing to God. In fact, “*And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him*” (Heb. 11:6).

Prayer and faith. But was that the extent of Nehemiah’s defense against his enemies? Was there any more to do? We continue reading that the work began and things were moving quickly. In no time the wall took shape and it caught the eye of their enemies. “*Now when Sanballat heard that we were building the wall, he was angry and greatly enraged, and he jeered at the Jews*” (Neh. 4:1). But these were just words and the work continued. Nehemiah again prayed and reported on the work, “*So we built the wall. And all the wall was joined together to half its height, for the people had a mind to work*” (Neh. 4:6).

The work and success of God’s people infuriated their enemies who turned from verbal insults to threats of physical assault. “*And they all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause confusion in it*” (Neh. 4:8). Nehemiah could have done the following: stopped the work God called him to do; tried to negotiate with those opposed; and insisted that peace was the most important thing. After all, isn’t peace more important than some brick and mortar wall? Apparently Nehemiah didn’t think so. We read that Nehemiah, “*prayed to our God and set a guard as a protection against them day and night,*” (Neh. 4:9). Nehemiah prayed and set a guard. However, the guard wasn’t just a lookout to report if the bad guys were coming, but they were armed citizens, “*I stationed the people by their clans, with their swords, their spears, and their bows*” (Neh. 4:13b). The sword, spear, and bow were common weapons of war and self-defense in that day.

Why were they armed to protect a wall? Because it was more than a wall at stake; it went deeper than that. It was a matter of life and death; the life and death of their families. Nehemiah understood the gravity of the threat. He said, “*Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes*” (Neh. 4:14b). And so, “*Neither I nor my brothers nor my servants nor the men of the guard who followed me, none of us took off our clothes; each kept his weapon at his right hand*” (Neh. 4:23). The phrase “*at his right hand,*” has also been interpreted “*even when he went for water*” (NIV). The point Nehemiah was making is that they remained armed and ready at all times.

The results were amazing; “*So the wall was finished...in fifty-two days*” (Neh. 6:15). In the end, Nehemiah gave credit to God for their success, “*And when all our enemies heard of it, all the nations around us were afraid and fell greatly in their own esteem, for they perceived that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God*” (Neh. 6:16). It must be noted that

while Nehemiah prayed and trusted God he also used armed guards to protect the people. Their enemies knew they were armed and ready.

### ***Elisha commissioned to kill***

*“Elisha...you shall anoint to be prophet in your place.”  
(1 Kings 19:16)*

Elisha was a man of the cloth. He was a prophet. He was clergy. He wasn't a military leader like Joshua; he wasn't a future king like David; he wasn't even an armed engineer like Nehemiah. He was a spokesman for God. Elisha was called to proclaim the word of God in perilous times. Elisha lived during a season of lawlessness and violence, and it started at the top with Israel's king. King Ahab was second only to his wife Queen Jezebel in wickedness. *“There was none who sold himself to do what was evil in the sight of the Lord like Ahab, whom Jezebel his wife incited”* (1 Kings 21:25). Jezebel's solution for those who dared to defy her was their execution. She executed God's prophets,<sup>6</sup> she sentenced to death an innocent man named Naboth simply because he refused to sell a piece of land her husband,<sup>7</sup> and she put out a contract to kill Elisha's predecessor Elijah.<sup>8</sup> This was the situation in Israel when Elisha was called to be a prophet.

Elijah fled from Jezebel's threat of death and feared his life was over. But the Lord ordered Elijah to anoint three men to special positions: Hazael as Syria's king, Jehu as Israel's king, and Elisha as a prophet to take his place. These three men were commissioned by the Lord to put a violent end to Ahab's evil regime. Hazael would kill Ahab in battle and Jehu would execute Jezebel and several other relatives of the royal family.<sup>9</sup>

Hazael, Jehu, and Elisha—two kings and a prophet. Two men of violence, and a man of the cloth. Two men who wouldn't hesitate to kill in order to secure a throne, and a spokesman for God. While there's not much information about Hazael's military background we do know that he was a violent and vile man. He was an official for Ben-Hadad I, king of Syria. Ben-Hadad was terminally ill and Hazael hastened death by smothering the king with a wet towel to secure the throne for himself.<sup>10</sup> Jehu was also a man of violence. He was a military commander in Israel's army and was anointed as king to *“strike down the house of Ahab”* (2 Kgs. 9:7). He personally saw to the killing of several men. So what was Elisha's part? Was the job of this prophet to only pray? No, he too was commissioned to kill. *“And the one who escapes from the sword of Hazael shall Jehu put to death, and the one who escapes from the sword of Jehu shall Elisha put to death”* (1 Kgs. 19:17).

Joshua, David, Nehemiah, and Elisha. Four men of God all commissioned by the Lord to use deadly force in protecting his people. The overarching witness from the Old Testament clearly shows God sanctioned the use of deadly force to protect innocent lives. However, can we use these Old Testament stories after the revelation of the New Testament? Let us read and ponder the Apostle Paul's words concerning exactly this same question. *“Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the*

---

<sup>6</sup> (1 Kgs. 18:13)

<sup>7</sup> (1 Kgs. 21:1-16)

<sup>8</sup> (1 Kgs. 19:2)

<sup>9</sup> (1 Kgs. 22:29-36; 2 Kgs. 9)

<sup>10</sup> (2 Kgs. 8:15)

*end of the ages has come*” (1 Cor. 10:11). But we have more than just Paul’s words. We also have a witness from the New Testament.

### ***Peter carried a sword***

*“Lord, shall we strike with the sword?”  
(Luke 22:49)*

Peter was a fisherman called to be an apostle. In fact, Peter (whose name was Simon until Jesus changed it to Peter) and his brother Andrew were the first of the disciples called to follow the Savior. Peter and the others were with Christ for about three years before he was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane. The garden was a regular retreat for Jesus and the Twelve, so the traitor Judas knew exactly where they were. He left the Passover meal early to alert the Jewish authorities seeking to arrest Christ.

Jesus knew exactly what he was walking into that fateful night. He understood what was to come when he led his disciples to the garden to pray and requested they too watch and pray.<sup>11</sup> But while Jesus prayed and the disciples fell asleep, until awakened by Judas, leading a crowd of soldiers, temple officers, and Jewish elders armed with swords and clubs to arrest the Lord. The ever impulsive Peter sprang into action, ready to defend his Master. In fact, he did defend Jesus, *“Then Simon Peter, having a sword, drew it and struck the high priest’s servant and cut off his right ear”* (John 18:10).

This sword (as one scholar notes) might not be much more than a dagger.<sup>12</sup> However, it could also be the popular Roman short sword with its eighteen inch blade. Either way, it begs the question, *“What was Peter doing with a sword?”* He wasn’t expecting Jesus’ arrest. Jesus’ arrest and crucifixion took the disciples by surprise. Why then was Peter armed? A sword or dagger was a popular weapon for self-defense. In fact, Jesus even told his disciples that didn’t have swords to buy one, *“And let the one who has no sword sell his cloak and buy one”* (Luke 22:36). During the three years that Peter followed Christ it was likely commonplace for Peter to carry a sword. Jesus simply responds to Peter’s actions with, *“Put the sword back into its sheath”* (John 18:11). Notice that Jesus didn’t correct Peter for his initiative, but told him he could have called to his Father for a legion of angels however, his mission was to fulfill Scripture. Neither did Jesus tell Peter to get rid of the sword.

What’s the take away? Peter, one of Jesus’ apostles and closest friends, regularly carried a deadly weapon for self-defense and for three years the Lord never condemned him or told him not to carry it. When Peter did use deadly force in an effort to protect his Master, Jesus simply told him to put the sword back in its sheath.

### ***What did Jesus say?***

*“Deliver us from evil.”  
(Matt. 6:13)*

---

<sup>11</sup> (The record of Jesus’ arrest is recorded in all four Gospels: Matt. 26:36-56; Mark 14:32-50; Luke 22:39-53; John 18:1-11)

<sup>12</sup> (Carson, 1991, p. 579)

Jesus often spoke in parables. The Greek word transliterated as *parable* means to place alongside for comparison. Jesus took what was familiar (e.g. a farmer sowing seed) and placed it alongside what was unfamiliar (e.g. the Kingdom of God). This comparison used the familiar to shed light on the unfamiliar. Jesus did this when he shared this parable, “*When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own palace, his goods are safe. But when one stronger than he attacks him and overcomes him, he takes away his armor in which he trusted and divides his spoil*” (Luke 11:21-22). Even during the famous “Pax Romana” (the peace of Rome)—when Roman soldiers were present to ensure law and order—bearing arms for personal protection was so acceptable and commonplace that Jesus could use it for his parables.

Many Christians point to the Sermon on the Mount to defend a pacifist position. Jesus said, “*Do not resist the one who is evil*” (Matt. 5:39a). The KJV says “*resist not evil*” but the context (as the ESV and almost all new translations indicate) demonstrates Jesus was referring to an evil *person*, not evil itself. Especially since elsewhere in the Bible we are commanded to resist evil. And from the earlier examples of this chapter we see that we are even to take a stand against evil in the form of physical attacks. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus addressed our response to non-believing individuals who treat believers unfairly. Christ was speaking about those who are dishonest or unjust in their dealings with his followers, he wasn’t teaching about how to handle a physical assault.

However, Jesus also said, “*But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also*” (Matt. 5:39b). This is a key passage used to promote pacifism, but it is misused by well-meaning people when they suggest that self-defense is wrong. They believe that the “Christian” thing to do is to remain passive while an aggressor physically assaults you. As a young boy this verse caused me considerable guilt when I defended myself against the playground bully. But Jesus wasn’t talking about physical assault in the Sermon on the Mount. Rather, he was addressing verbal personal insults.

A slap to the right cheek indicated a backhanded slap to the face as a show of disdain or scorn for another, it wasn’t seen as a physical assault. It was regarded as a grossly offensive insult, and is still regarded as a serious insult in the Near East today.<sup>13</sup> This attack went directly against a person’s self-esteem, ego, character, or reputation. In our society we call this libel, verbal assault, or an insulting gesture. It amounts to speaking badly about someone, spreading rumors, or hurting with cutting words or comments. Jesus was saying don’t try to even the score by trading insults with another; even if it means you receive more insults. Both the textual and cultural contexts support the understanding that Jesus’ words were referring to a verbal insult, and not a physical attack.

Furthermore, in this section (Matt. 5:38-42) Jesus is teaching about *revenge*, not self-defense. He introduces the section with, “*You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth’*” (Matt. 5:38). Revenge is an action that takes place after the offense is committed and the threat has passed.

The Greek word translated *resist* means to be set against, to withstand, or to oppose.<sup>14</sup> Jesus, in teaching about retaliating, says we are not to set ourselves against another by trying to even the score. We are not to withstand another by lashing out. We are not to seek revenge. Does this mean it was wrong to oppose the likes of Stalin, Hitler, and Hussein? No, that’s not what Jesus meant. Does it mean we may not file charges against someone who burglarizes our home?

---

<sup>13</sup> (Ferguson, 1988, p. 100)

<sup>14</sup> (Biblical Studies Press, L.L.C., 1996-2006)

No, that's not what Jesus meant. Does it mean we cannot defend ourselves during a physically assault? No! That's not what Jesus meant! Then, what did Jesus mean?

Jesus was talking about our everyday relationships with others. Jesus was referring to common relationships we have with our co-workers, peers at school, the store employee, the hairdresser, or the auto mechanic—people we encounter daily who may treat us unfairly. People who are dishonest with us. People who personally wrong us. By saying, *“Do not resist the one who is evil”* Jesus essentially meant, don't retaliate against those who personally wrong you.

### ***A Balanced Approach***

*“Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.”*

*(Romans 12:20)*

So, what's the take-away from our overview? Are we to be paranoid, gun-toting, vigilantes? Absolutely not. As demonstrated from Scripture, a balanced approach is in order. Above all we are to have faith in God. Faith in God and taking personal responsibility is a balanced approach. This is what Nehemiah did, *“And we prayed to our God and set a guard as a protection against them day and night”* (Neh. 4:9). Nehemiah trusted God and set a guard. Joshua trusted God and wielded a sword. David trusted God and used a sling. When I was a police officer I trusted God and wore my bulletproof vest. I trusted God and carried a nightstick. I trusted God and carried my service pistol. When I drove my young children I trusted God and secured them in a safety seat. At home I trust God and lock my doors. The overarching witness from Scripture about self-defense is that we are to trust God and take responsible action.

Jesus, speaking to believers, said, *“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you”* (John 15:12). The next explains, *“Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends”* (John 15:13). Laying down your life is done by intervening on another's behalf. Intervening means standing in the gap. Coming between an aggressor and a victim.

As a husband and father I'm compelled by love to protect my wife and children from harm. Scripture tells me I'm to protect them even if it costs me my life, *“Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her”* (Eph. 5:25). The obligation to protect my family doesn't end when we step outside the house. When I'm in public I take that obligation with me. This includes when I'm in church.

As a pastor I'm charged to protect the congregation the Lord entrusts to me. Paul, speaking to the elders of the churches in Ephesus charges them to, *“Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God”* (Acts 20:28). While everyone agrees Paul was speaking primarily to spiritual protection I believe he was also speaking to physical protection. In fact, leading up to that statement Paul was talking specifically about his own physical safety.

A peaceable people? Yes, that should be a mark of any local New Testament church. We should, as Paul exhorts, *“live peaceably with all.”* But we can only do that if it is possible for us to do so. Here's the whole verse, *“If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all”* (Rom. 12:18). When an aggressor wielding a gun walks into a church it is not possible to live in peace.