

### **Job 6 (8-9) – Suicide and the Savior**

Sometimes theological questions are actually personal questions about the burdens on a person's heart. So, if you really want to help the person, before you launch into the theology of the question, it is wise to make sure you understand the situation behind the question.

Take, for example, when someone asks "What happens to people who commit suicide?" Consider responding with a probing question such as "Why do you ask?" Or a statement such as "That's a serious situation. Tell me what's happening in your world."

In this way you can discover if this person is thinking about suicide or has had a loved one commit suicide. Or if what they are wondering about is actually even a case of suicide. And you can find out if that person was or is a Christian. They may be feeling helpless or dealing with fear or guilt. Using probing questions helps you to go beyond the ethics of suicide, and it takes you to where the person is at. This is where you need to be in order to form a situationally proper response, before you may get into the precise theology of the question.

When we talk of suicide, we must remember that it is about the will to die. A person who commits suicide is one who has acted on their intent to die. And suicide can be active or passive, by your own hand, or by the hand of someone else. Just as David murdered Uriah by having Joab place him in the heat of the battle, so too, someone can commit suicide by the agency of another, or by intentionally putting themselves into deadly peril.

However, you need to take each particular account into consideration. Suicide isn't a cookie cutter sin. Someone who willingly sacrifices himself for the life of another, such as a man who leaps onto a grenade to shield others from the blast, this wouldn't be suicide, this would be heroism. He is taking a suicidal path. But he isn't acting on a desire to die, but on a desire for others to live. And although it was more than mere heroism, think of the willing sacrifice of Jesus for your sin. That certainly wasn't his suicide. That was our salvation.

Suicide is self-murder; therefore, it is sin. But is everything that you might label as a suicide actually a case of suicide? What about those who are institutionalized for mental illness, and in an irrational moment they take the opportunity to end their life? Is there any degree of differentiation here? And is suicidal action always the same thing as suicide the sin? What of the mother who goes without food that her child may live? She knows she'll die if she doesn't eat, but she would rather die of starvation than have her child die of starvation. What about a terminally ill man whose condition was depleting all his money? What if it would eventually leave his invalid wife with no other means of support? What if he took his life, not because of his own pain or because of depression, but because of love for his wife?

What about someone who has a terminal illness or inoperable condition who may have only a few months to live? Perhaps they take a drug to ease their pain, but the drug accelerates the dying process. Is this suicide when they aren't motivated by the desire to die sooner but by the desire to die less painfully? What about someone who refuses a treatment that might prolong their life? Is it suicide when one seeks to shorten one's life merely by refusing to retard the progress of an inescapable dying condition?

What of a soldier who took a cyanide capsule rather than divulge military secrets to the enemy? What about someone who steps in front of a car to push someone else out of its path? What about someone who shoots themselves as they are on fire? Yes, that may seem a little extreme. Examples could be multiplied over and over, and some seem clearer to discern than others, but it isn't always as cookie cutter clear as we might like it to be.

Suffice it to say that this is why you need to understand the particular situation of the person who asks you about suicide. You have to walk people through complex situations. They don't just need your "answer key"; they need to know how you arrived at your answers.

People can approach you and appear to be looking for answers. And theology provides answers. But your approach to them is very important. Because many people aren't just looking for the correct theological answer, but the answer as to "how now should they live". To shepherd people through the difficulties of life isn't just a matter of pointing to the place they need to be. It is a matter of personally guiding them to that place. Theology is vital, but the approach and application of theology is a matter of wisdom. It is how you learn to love wisely, and guide graciously. And that is the sort of answer that everyone is looking for.

Now, in addressing the theology of the suicide question, it has been said by others, but it is true: suicide is not the unpardonable sin. No one who reads Matthew 12:31 would think that Jesus is talking about suicide. And suicide isn't even some special category of sin. There are different types of sin, but there are no distinctions between sins, such as the Roman Catholic categories of venial and mortal sins. There are no degrees of separation from God. The fact is that all sin separates us from God. All sin breaks fellowship with God, whether that sin was purposeful or not. So, it isn't that people are making too much of this sin, but that they are making too little of all sin.

And they are making too little of Jesus. You see, receiving the free gift of eternal life means we are forgiven of all our past, present, and future sins (cf. Romans 8:1). Yes, sin is serious. But those who say that you have to repent of each specific sin in order to be forgiven of it aren't considering the true depth of sin or the full extent of redemption. Or the differing aspects of forgiveness, which we will get to in a moment. The truth is that no one can fully realize all of their sins. There are sinful things in our life that we don't fully see. And every single person who dies does so with some amount of unconfessed sin in their life. But Jesus has forgiven every Christian of all their sins, including unconfessed sins, and including suicide. Friends, that's the gospel.

However, if all our past, present, and future sins are already forgiven, then why does the Bible teach that we must continue to confess our sins, and find forgiveness and cleansing for them (1 John 1:9)? Liken it to how a loving parent makes their child admit something bad they did was wrong. But that child remains part of the family. They will never be disowned. The parents judge the behavior and might administer some consequences. But they never stop loving the child.

There is a difference between *judicial* forgiveness and *parental* (fellowship) forgiveness. Judicial forgiveness is about God *being* our Father (cf. Ephesians 1:3-7), while parental forgiveness is calling on God *as* Father. God is our judge, yet we are judicially forgiven the minute we commit any sin because we have Jesus as an advocate in heaven (1 John 2:1). What we need to do is to confess our sin before God in order to continue in and restore close fellowship (1 John 1:9). God

is our Father, and he can be displeased with us and apply discipline to us for our sinful behavior (cf. Hebrews 12:5-11). Judicial forgiveness deals with our eternal status before God. Parental forgiveness deals with our current sanctification before God. 1 John 1:9 is speaking of an ongoing pardon and purification from sin, not the cleansing and forgiveness of salvation.

We must recognize the distinction between the eternal forgiveness of the guilt of sin that is ours the moment we embrace Jesus in faith, and that temporal forgiveness of sin we receive on a daily basis that enables us to experience the happiness of intimacy with God. This is the difference between union and communion with God. A professing believer who commits suicide has done a terrible thing. It is sin, it is outside God's will, and that person did not die in close fellowship with God. But they may still have been a child of God. They might have done terrible unrighteousness, but still have been justified by faith, declared righteous based on the merits of Christ.

This isn't to say that suicide isn't a serious matter. It is a tragedy, and it causes serious damage to those left behind. This message is not a justification for suicide. No matter how bad your life is, I would not encourage you to consider suicide as an option. And the truth is that suicide may be an indication that someone wasn't actually a Christian. It would be a perverse thing to commit suicide with the idea that it is good in God's eyes. That kind of thinking is not indicative of a person who has faith, but of a person doesn't understand forgiveness. But the act of suicide itself is not unforgiveable. For the person who is truly born again, it has already been judicially forgiven.

Christians can get depressed. Even those with great faith. Even to the point of wishing they'd never been born. Born again believers can feel hopeless. And godly men and women can sink into seasons of such despair that they want their life to end. You see this in the lives of biblical heroes such as Job (Job 6:8-9), Moses (Numbers 11:14-15), Elijah (1 Kings 19:4), Jeremiah (Jeremiah 20:14-18), and the Apostle Paul (2 Corinthians 1:8). God allows his children to feel desperation. Sometimes God brings us to that place in order to bring us to a new place (Jonah 4:8).

Now it is true that none of those men actually committed suicide. And it is also true that the Bible depicts certain people who did commit suicide, and each of those instances were about people who were not right with God, such as Abimelech (Judges 9:50-57), Saul (1 Samuel 31:2-5), Ahithophel (2 Samuel 17:23), Zimri (1 Kings 16:15-20), and Judas (Matthew 27:3-5). But the point remains; you can't just say that someone who is really a Christian could never get that far down into despair. It isn't biblically true. And the Bible says that Samson, who made ungodly choices near the end of his life and made a "suicidal choice" in his death (Judges 16:28-30), was nevertheless commended by God (Hebrews 11:32).

So, suicide may preclude a confession of sin, but we are saved by grace, not by confession of our sin. Suicide may indicate a lack of true faith, but faithful people can still reach the point of ultimate despair. And anyone who commits suicide has made their own choice and is responsible for their own sin. But Jesus has forgiven each Christian of all of their sins. This doesn't lessen the terrible trouble that suicide leaves in its wake. Christians will not be rewarded for committing suicide. But Christians will be forgiven for committing suicide. It's inexcusable, but not unforgivable.

God does not define a Christian's life by their sins. He defines a Christian's life by their Savior. So, suicide might end a Christian's life. But it does not define a Christian's life. Christ does.