

HOT TOPICS – SUICIDE

“Suicide: A Biblical Perspective” (1 Cor. 6:19-20; 10:13)

Suicide is a great problem around the world and also in Singapore. In 2012, the Samaritans of Singapore recorded that there were a record high 467 suicide cases in Singapore in that year (298 male and 169 female). That is 10.27 per 100,000 residents last year. Those involving people between 20 and 29 years old registered the most significant increase – 83 persons in 2012. From the statistical breakdown, the Samaritans made the following observation, “Suicide can affect anyone, regardless of gender, age, ethnicity, religion, income, social background, occupation, and nationality.”

The effects of suicide have touched all of us in one way or in another. William Cowper, who wrote many wonderful hymns like “There Is a Fountain” repeatedly attempted suicide. Many believers were shocked in Northern Ireland when one of the most revered Bible teachers, Pastor Willie Mullan took his life in 1980 after a period of debilitating illness. Dr Ian Paisley exhorted at his funeral,

Remember the best man at his best is only a man at the best. Many people attended our brother’s services, enjoyed his ministry, rejoiced in his prosperity, but how many of God’s people hung onto the horns of the altar for him as he was passing through these trials? Have we not all learned a lesson that God’s men are fallible, that God’s men are imperfect; that God’s men are like Elias - they are subject to like passions as we are; that God’s men need God’s help, and they need the prayers of God’s people. Maybe if you go home dear and you pray more for the preacher than you ever prayed, and more for the minister than you ever prayed, then our brother’s passing will not be in vain.

This is a very painful and emotionally charged subject. Hence, we need to retreat to the absolute foundation of Scriptural truth and only argue from what is clearly revealed.

SUICIDE IS A SIN

God alone is sovereign over the giving, sustaining, and taking away of life, “*For in Him we live, and move, and have our being*” (Acts 17:28; cf. Dan. 5:23). Job testified of the passing of his children, “*the LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.*” (Job 1:21) In Psalm 139:16, David affirms that God ordained all of his days before he was even born. When Solomon wrote of “*A time to be born, and a time to die*” he went on to say of God, “*He hath made every thing beautiful in His time*” (Eccl. 3:2, 11). Hence no one has the right to defy or undermine that process, as it would be an attack on God’s sovereign prerogative rights to give and take life. Suicide is a sinful rejection of God’s gift of life.

Human beings are unique as we are made in the image of God (Gen. 1:26-27). To take the life of another human being is to desecrate that image. God judged Cain directly when he committed the first murder. Even unbelievers intuitively recognise that reality – hence the fact we call for the police when our neighbour is murdered and not when our neighbour’s chicken is killed for dinner!

The taking of the life of a human by another human is clearly limited in Scripture to very specific circumstances e.g. warfare, capital punishment etc. Suicide is not a justified ground in

Scripture for taking human life. Most theologians recognise that suicide is self-murder i.e. unjustified killing of a human life. This is a transgression of the sixth commandment, “*thou shalt not kill*” (Exod. 20). We have no more right to destroy our lives than we have to destroy the life of another man. Anyone who commits suicide has to face God in eternity with their own blood on their hands, “*So then every one of us shall give account of himself to God*” (Rom. 14:12).

Believers especially recognise the sanctity of our body and life, as God has sole rights over our lives “*What? know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own? For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God’s?*” (1 Cor. 6:19-20; cf. Rom. 12:1-2).

Suicide is a powerful statement of unbelief in God’s sovereign power and provision. It is rooted in a fatalistic unbiblical view of life that sees the future as hopeless and without meaning. However, our future on earth is never hopeless (Acts 24:15; Romans 5:2-5, 8:24; 2 Cor. 1:10.) or devoid of meaning (Romans 8:28; Col. 1:29) when God is involved. There is always a way to overcome the temptations and trials of life without taking our lives, “*There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it*” (1 Cor. 10:13). Suicide is essentially a denial of God’s sovereign power to preserve and provide for us in our darkest hour.

Furthermore, suicide is a very selfish act as it leaves tremendous sorrow for many loved ones and friends to deal with on earth. These are the people who have to pick up the broken pieces left behind and rebuild lives. Not only will the persons who discover the body have to face a horrific sight, but those who are left with the pain and guilt of past relationships issues. The painful scars left by a suicide rarely heal easily. This can eventually produce great bitterness and anger towards the one who committed suicide.

The taking of one’s life is also a bad testimony for any professing Christian, as it portrays God’s care and love in a wrong way to those around us. Indeed, the fact that believers (and often unbelievers) question the reality of a professing believer who commits suicide should warn of this. In Hebrews 11:13 we read of the OT saints who, “*died in faith.*” The Bible repeatedly mentions the association of faith with death, which reveals an important part in our testimony is not only how we live and also how we die. John Wesley used to say of the old Methodists, “our people die well.” Believers are meant to die well by having the desire of Paul that, “*Christ shall be magnified in my body, whether it be by life, or by death.*” (Philp. 1:20)

EXAMPLES OF SUICIDE IN THE BIBLE

There are a number of suicides recorded in the Bible. None of them are associated with people of godly character or conduct such as Abimelech the son of Gideon (Jud. 9:54) and Zimri (I Kings. 16:18–19). We will survey some of the other prominent ones.

(1) KING SAUL - The first one that we read who committed suicide was King Saul,

Then said Saul unto his armourbearer, Draw thy sword, and thrust me through therewith; lest these uncircumcised come and thrust me through, and abuse me. But his armourbearer would not; for he was sore afraid. Therefore Saul took a sword, and fell upon it. And when his armourbearer saw that Saul was dead, he fell likewise upon his sword, and died with him. (1 Sam. 31:4-5)

Saul's demise by apparent suicide was the end of a long process of self-destruction and rejection of God's mercy by his refusal to repent. Campbell Morgan observed scathingly, "Suicide is always the ultimate action of cowardice. In the case of Saul, and in many similar cases, it is perfectly natural; but let it never be glorified as heroic. It is the last resort of the man who dare not stand up to life." Saul's armourbearer also committed suicide with his master.

(2) AHITHOPHEL – Another man who took his own life was David's former close advisor, Ahithophel who betrayed him. When Absalom rejected Ahithophel's counsel, he deliberately went home and committed suicide. This may have been because he could not take the thought of being rejected as he was humiliated by his loss of stature. However, more likely he took his life because Ahithophel foresaw that the strategic implication of rejecting his counsel would result in David's eventual restoration and his own death for treason.

And when Ahithophel saw that his counsel was not followed, he saddled his ass, and arose, and gat him home to his house, to his city, and put his household in order, and hanged himself, and died, and was buried in the sepulchre of his father. (2 Sam. 17:23)

Ahithophel showed a sound mind in prudently putting his affairs in order but a foolish one in then taking his life. It was rooted in his self-centred view of his circumstances.

(3) JUDAS – Probably the most notorious suicide in the Scriptures was Judas Iscariot. After betraying the Lord Jesus Christ for thirty pieces of silver, Judas admitted, "*I have sinned in that I have betrayed the innocent blood*" (Matt. 27:4). However, when the Jewish leaders dismissed his words of remorse we read,

And he cast down the pieces of silver in the temple, and departed, and went and hanged himself. (Matt. 27:5)

Judas had the overpowering guilt of having committed the vilest of sins in betraying the perfect Son of God. He had two choices to deal with the guilt – repent and seek forgiveness or seek self-destruction. Tragically for him, Judas made the wrong choice again.

BELIEVERS WHO EXPRESSED SUICIDAL THOUGHTS

It is a reality that many believers feel at times that they wish their lives would end. We live in a sin-cursed world and we know that eternity is infinitely more wonderful than earth. Despair of life can be caused by issues like: sin, failure, rejection, troublesome homes, mental illness, and intense physical suffering.

A number of believers in the Bible have expressed the desire to end their lives. Some of these have been some of the greatest of God's saints. Saving faith does not guarantee immunity against feelings of loneliness and dejection. Moses asked God to take away his life,

I am not able to bear all this people alone, because it is too heavy for me. And if thou deal thus with me, kill me, I pray thee, out of hand, if I have found favour in

thy sight; and let me not see my wretchedness. (Num. 11:14-15)

Elijah was so discouraged with the seeming failure of his ministry and his loneliness that he cried,

**It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life; for I am not better than my fathers.
(1 Kings 19:4)**

Job on a number of times pleaded with God in his sufferings to end it all,

Oh that I might have my request; and that God would grant me the thing that I long for! Even that it would please God to destroy me; that he would let loose his hand, and cut me off! (Job 6:8-9)

So that my soul chooseth strangling, and death rather than my life. I loathe it; I would not live alway: let me alone; for my days are vanity. (Job 7:15-16)

O that thou wouldest hide me in the grave, that thou wouldest keep me secret, until thy wrath be past, that thou wouldest appoint me a set time, and remember me! (Job 14:13)

The prophet Jonah was angered by God's grace to the people in Nineveh that he wanted to be taken out of this world,

And it came to pass, when the sun did arise, that God prepared a vehement east wind; and the sun beat upon the head of Jonah, that he fainted, and wished in himself to die, and said, It is better for me to die than to live. (Jonah 4:8)

It must be noted in all these examples that these saints of God requested of the Lord to die but they did not attempt to end their lives by their own self-will. In fact, God was able to use them again for further ministry. In Job's case his last end was greater than his beginning. It should also be noted that when the Scriptures describes these men's despair and suicidal desires it make it clear that they were wrong.

Many saints of God have endured by God's sustaining grace terrible afflictions and trials. Just read the summary of those in Hebrews 11 who, "*were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword: they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented*" (Heb. 11:37). In the midst of the crucible of great suffering, they did not give up, but endured to the end. They proved the anchor of God could hold them in the worst of storms.

WILL SUICIDE SEND YOU TO HELL?

The Bible is silent on the possibility of a true believer committing suicide. Nor does it say what happens if to a person who does. Therefore, it would not be prudent to grant blanket assurance that professed believers who commit suicide do go to heaven. The only way to reason on this matter is from broader principles of Scripture of what we know and what we do not know.

We do know that even after regeneration, a Christian is capable of committing very serious sins e.g. David committed adultery and murder. Indeed, the taking of the life of Uriah in cold blood did not invalidate David's salvation. Reformed pastor, Miguel Núñez points out,

Suicide is a serious offense against God, as it represents arrogant violation of the gift of life the Creator has given. But if a genuine believer is theoretically capable of taking another's life, why is it impossible to conceive he could ever take his own?

We also know that suicide is a sin but it is not the unpardonable sin (cf. Matt. 12:31) so we cannot say it is a sin that cannot be forgiven. The Bible makes clear that those who are God's children have been forgiven for all their sins - past, present, and future (Col. 2:13-14; Heb. 10:11-18). We are eternally declared positionally justified because of Christ's righteousness and not merely justifiable when we are converted. The Scriptures also makes it clear that sin and death cannot separate us who are truly born again from the love of God,

For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom. 8:38-39)

If "death" or "any other creature" (which arguably includes ourselves in an act of suicide) cannot separate us from the love of God, then it is reasonable to conclude that God's grace can overcome the sin of suicide. Jesus Christ testified of His true sheep, "*And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand*" (John 10:28). If no one person (including surely ourselves) can pluck us from Christ's hand then this would be suggestive that a believer who sins in this manner cannot perish.

Death separates us from many things but not from God who has loved us with an everlasting love and given us everlasting life. Now, either that is true or it the Bible is making false promises. God does not give us temporary eternal life - otherwise, it would not be eternal. Everlasting does not mean a few years or even decades but forever! The love and grace of God is stronger than the power of death. We must rest in the assurance that the Judge of all the earth shall do right when we all appear before Him (2 Cor. 5:10).

CONCLUSION

Someone has said, "Our lives are God's gift to us. What we do with them is our gift back to God." Believers need to minister to those caught up in suicidal thoughts by pointing them to the Lord. In Acts 16 when the Philippian jailor wanted to end his life, Paul pointed him to Christ as the ultimate hope for him to live. That is a biblical pattern for every Christian to follow. To those who are contemplating suicide, we urge that you seek hope in the Person and Work of Christ who is the source of all true hope.

If you are not a believer, then remember that suicide only ushers you into a much worse eternity in hell. Death does not take away pain or guilt. Taking your life will not extinguish your suffering but only will make it permanent and intensified beyond imagination. God wants the guilt of your sins to lead you to repentance, forgiveness and everlasting peace but not self-destruction. This is God's desire for you (Psa. 51:17; Isa. 42:3; Matt. 12:20).

To any professing Christian who is thinking suicidal thoughts we challenge you to examine yourself to see whether you are in the faith (2 Cor. 13:5). Believers are called to walk circumspectly and redeem the times of our lives for God's glory. We are supposed to die to self-will and self-glory, not kill ourselves. Our times are in God's hands (Psalm 31:15) and we want every moment of every day to count for Him. Steve Cole counsels those in depression,

The Bible says that we must discipline ourselves for the purpose of godliness (1 Tim. 4:7). Discipline, by definition, means going against my feelings. I may not feel like exercising, but if I'm disciplined, I do it anyway. I may feel like spending money impulsively, but if I'm disciplined, I go against my feelings because I have decided to live by a budget. While even the most mature believers are susceptible to depression (Elijah, 1 Kings 19:1-4; John the Baptist, Matt. 11:2-3; Peter, Matt. 26:69-75), the Bible is clear that we should be marked by joy in the Lord, even in some of the most difficult circumstances (John 15:11; Acts 5:41; 16:25; Gal. 5:22; Phil 4:4). A consistently depressed Christian is a lousy advertisement for the Lord and His salvation. And so we must confront our depression and bring it under the control of the Holy Spirit. When we think rightly and act rightly, our depression will be replaced by genuine joy in the Lord.

Suicide is a serious sin against God's sovereign rule over our lives. There is no circumstance, which justifies any person, especially a Christian, to take his or her own life. In the darkest of days, remember there is always hope in God,

Why art thou cast down, O my soul? and why art thou disquieted within me? hope thou in God: for I shall yet praise him, who is the health of my countenance, and my God (Psa. 42:11; cf. Prov. 23:17-18).

Tomorrow is a new day. God's grace is always sufficient. Because Jesus lives and rules, we now have a reason to live. Press on until Jesus comes or calls. Don't take a permanent solution for a temporary problem. The anchor will hold in the worst of storms.

*Troubles almost 'whelm the soul;
Griefs like billows o'er me roll;
Tempters seek to lure astray;
Storms obscure the light of day:
But in Christ I can be bold,
I've an anchor that shall hold.*