

The classroom door opened as a student entered and handed a note to my teacher. With pained expression she looked my way and asked me to come to the front of the class. She then handed me the note summoning me to the principal's office with news that my best friend had left school, driven home, and shot himself. The walk across campus was agonizing. Though my mind was racing, my legs and heart grew heavier with every step.

I recall the short drive to his house where friends were gathering with his family. I needed to see his mom and dad in order for the news to ring true and yet I dreaded the finality that awaited me. I remember the pain and sorrow on all the faces -- the guilt, shame, confusion, darkness and sadness enveloping all who were near. I couldn't think, couldn't cry, couldn't breathe.

That was my junior year of high school and these memories are my first thoughts when asked about suicide. My mind is immediately flooded not primarily with passages and arguments, but memories. This topic, like divorce and remarriage, homosexuality, and a host of other issues, is not merely theological. It is intensely personal to all who have felt its cold sting.

How does one write on the topic of suicide? How does one contextualize a paper to a readership that could include not only those merely curious about the Bible's teaching on suicide, but also those who are considering suicide and those who have lost loved ones to suicide? This is my struggle as I write.

In this paper, I hope to accomplish a few things. First, I want to give some context for suicide in regards to its prevalence today. Second, I hope to offer some theological reflection upon the biblical text. Third, I simply want to offer hope and help to those who find themselves considering suicide as a viable way out of the darkness and pain of a fallen world by commending Christ and the hope that is found only and truly in Him.

Facts and Figures on Suicide

International:

1. In the past 5 decades, suicide rates have increased by about 60 percent in some countries.
2. In some countries, among some age groups, suicide ranks as high as third among leading causes of death.
3. In 2000, approximately 1 million people died of suicide, equating to roughly 1 death per 40 seconds.

National:

1. About 35,000 people die by suicide in the U.S. each year.
2. Suicide is the 11th leading cause of death in the U.S., but ranks as high as 4th in some age groups.
3. A person dies by suicide about every 15 minutes in the U.S.
4. Approximately 90 Americans take their own life every day.
5. Though no exact data is available, many estimate that there are 8-25 attempted suicides for every actual death.

Is Suicide Always Sinful?

Suicide is murder of oneself, and it is prohibited by the command, "You shall not murder" (Ex. 20:13). It is a serious sin against God and brings immense, lifelong grief to loved ones who are left, but the Bible nowhere teaches that suicide is a unique and unforgiveable sin that prevents a person who has lived by faith in Christ from being saved.¹

We should begin by defining suicide. Some definitions merely state that it is the intentional taking of one's own life, but I think this attempt lacks the proper nuance. For instance, Christ intentionally laid down His life, soldiers intentionally forfeit their own lives for the sake of others, etc. and these sacrifices should not be confused with suicide. Suicide involves the intentional "murder" of self, not the redemptive sacrifice of self for the sake of others.²

Though most translations of the Bible do not include the word "suicide," there is much that can be gleaned from the pages of Scripture on this topic. The Scriptures contain a number of examples of suicide (2 Samuel 17:23; 1 Kings 16:18, Matthew 27:5), but as they occur in the context of narrative, no explicit judgment upon the actions themselves is offered. Therefore, rather than looking at these recorded acts of suicide, I think it is most helpful to interpret the biblical perspective by considering three related streams of revelation: the sanctity of human life as image bearers, the subsequent commands against murder, and the authoritative rights of God over all life.

¹ ESV Study Bible

² In saying this, I am aware that some who are depressed assume that suicide is the best option as their family will be better off without them. Thus they would call their suicide a redemptive sacrifice, but such a justification is without merit. Sacrifice intends to save another's life, not simply make it better.

Man as Image Bearer

You and I bear the image of God and thus our lives are valuable. According to the Scriptures, mankind was originally created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27) with a call to mirror His character and authority in the created order. Though the Fall has profoundly affected this image, it has not been forfeited or destroyed. In the post-Fall account of Genesis 9:6, we see that murder is prohibited specifically because of the designation of man as an image bearer (see also James 3:9 for a post-Fall designation of man being in the likeness of God).

Prohibition of Murder

Given the reality of our role as bearers of the divine image, the Scriptures are unswervingly and consistently clear in the condemnation of murder (Exodus 20:13, Exodus 21:12, Numbers 35:30, Matthew 15:19, Romans 1:29, 1 Peter 4:15, Revelation 21:8, et al).³ All murder is sin and thus all self-murder is sinful. While there certainly can be and often are contributing spiritual and physical factors such as depression these are not to be used as excuses to attempt to justify the act.

Authoritative Rights of God

As Creator, Sovereign, and Judge, God both gives and justly takes life from His creatures (Job 1:21). God, and God alone, has all ultimate authority (Daniel 4:35; Psalm 115:3, Romans 9:20, Isaiah 45:9). This authority certainly includes the right to take the life of man. The creature has no inherent right to steal life, even his own. We are to give our lives for the sake of others, not take our lives for the sake of self.

Conclusion

Murder is sinful because all men bear the image of God and we have no right to destroy this image through the taking of life. Suicide is a vivid demonstration of man's natural longing for autonomy, a rebellious craving fixed at the center of the Fall in the garden. In attempting to take our own lives, we hear hints of the subtle whisper of the serpent to be our own "god" and see shadows of the sinful desire through which we fell in the first place. We believe we will find liberty in taking our own lives as Adam and Eve pursued freedom in the fruit. They were wrong and so are we if we listen to the lie.

Is Suicide Unforgivable?

Some have stated that suicide is a type of unforgivable sin, but surely this is not the meaning of the "unforgiven" sin which Jesus teaches about in passages like Matthew 12 and Mark 3. Rather, this interpretation probably arose initially out of the Roman Catholic penance system in which one must actually confess every individual sin (or at least those deemed "mortal" vs. "venial") before it will be forgiven. As suicide would not allow one an opportunity to confess and seek penance, Roman Catholicism has historically taught that suicide will not be forgiven. However, this simply is not a Scriptural understanding of repentance, forgiveness and confession.

Can a Christian Commit Suicide?

Not much is more paradoxical and puzzling than the suicide of one who professes faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ. The seeming contradictions begin to pile up. How does one with hope live in such despair? How does one who has experienced the light fall into such darkness? How does one who knows that God can deliver from all evil doubt that He can deliver from this present circumstance? And yet it happens.

The paradox of suicide is actually a vivid picture of the more subtle inconsistency of any sin in the life of a believer. We must be careful lest we distinguish suicide as the one sin (or one of a few) which is impossible for a believer when the Scriptures themselves do not state this. While it is certainly true that suicide is murder, murder is sin, and sin separates from God, it is equally true that all sin is forgiven by grace through faith for those who trust in Christ.

For those who have lost sons, daughters, mothers, fathers, siblings and friends to suicide and are struggling with the reality of your loved one's profession, my encouragement to you is to remember that the gospel promises eternal life for all who have trusted in the gospel of Jesus Christ. If your loved one trusted Christ then he or she is with him, paradox or not. Even suicide cannot separate God's children from Him (John 10:28-30, Romans 8:28-39). Take heart in the gospel and seek refuge and healing in God's word. Hope and rest in the goodness and mercy of God.

In answering this question, I am concerned that some would inappropriately interpret hope communicated to those who have lost loved ones as license to engage in the act. Knowing that life is better with Christ (Philippians 1:23) does not excuse suicide. If you are convinced that you are a child of God, do not therefore conclude that you can sin without consequence. The Bible has much to say of the danger of mocking God in such a manner (Galatians 6:7-9).

³ A distinction is made between intentional and unintentional killing similar to our culture's distinction between murder and manslaughter, with harsher penalties and condemnation for the former. There is also a distinction in the text between "murder" and capital punishment, warfare, self-defense, etc.

Hope

Suicide is cultivated in the soil of despair -- a terrible affliction which robs, steals, blinds, deafens and misdirects. The despairing soul feels no hope, no rest, and no joy as emptiness, numbness, and apathy produce a spiritual vacuum. Darkness descends like a fog lying thick upon the heart and mind and nothing is seen, felt or heard except the silence.

Despair is a powerful poison, but there is an antidote – hope. Hope is the great confession of the Christian. Hope is our very breath. Hope is a light shining brilliantly in the midst of seemingly overwhelming mist and darkness. As Andy Dufresne declares in *The Shawshank Redemption*, “Hope is a good thing, maybe the best of things, and no good thing ever dies.” Though not an inspired text, his words certainly ring true in light of Romans 5.

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

Romans 5:1-5

So what is our hope? This is a critical question because if we set our hopes on the wrong thing, we will grow disheartened, discouraged, depressed and weary. Putting our hope in health, wealth and happiness – the perfect marriage, the long life of luxury, comfort and security, the steady job, the praise of others – will ultimately fail. These things cannot sustain our hope and they were not intended to do so.

Our hope is that one day the darkness will fade as light pierces the night and Christ rips open the sky. One day all sickness, death, pain and sorrow will melt away, every tear will be wiped dry, every desire will be met. One day we will know fullness of joy and pleasures evermore (Psalm 16:11), if we just hold fast to Christ. Our hope is that one day all that is wrong will be right.

But that day is not today. If our hopes for happiness, contentment, satisfaction and joy rest entirely upon the shoulders of the present, we will crumble beneath the pain and sorrow of a creation still subjected to futility. Despair can only grow when we lose hope and we only lose hope when we transfer our satisfaction and contentment from God’s promises for the future to our expectations for today. But Christ calls us to another day, a better day beyond today, and until that day we must wait...

in hope...seeing through the mirage of despair and into the eternal joy prepared for those who love and trust the Son Who has rescued us and called us out of death and into life, out of darkness and into light, out of despair and into hope.

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Romans 8:18-25

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Recommended Resources

For those who are wrestling through suicidal thoughts or struggling with the aftermath of the suicide of a loved one, please contact a homegroup leader, minister, pastor, elder or other faithful leader who can help shepherd you through the darkness. Do not wrestle and struggle alone.

The following are just a few helpful resources on the topics of suicide, despair and depression for those who wish to study deeper:

- ***I Just Want to Die: Replacing Suicidal Thoughts with Hope***
by David Powlison
- ***Grieving a Suicide: Help for the Aftershock***
by David Powlison
- ***When the Darkness Will Not Lift***
by John Piper
- ***Seven Thoughts on Suffering***