

# Suicide, Scripture, and the Grace of God

By Dr. Jim Denison

More people die from suicide than from homicide in America. Suicide is the third leading cause of death for those aged 15-24, and is most common among those aged 65 years and older. Suicide rates among the elderly are highest for those who are divorced or widowed. In the last half-century, the suicide rate among adolescents and young adults has nearly tripled.

These are some of the facts regarding the tragedy of suicide. However, you are likely reading this essay because this subject is more personal than objective for you. I hope the following conversation can help.

I am writing as a pastor and theologian, not a counselor, psychologist, or psychiatrist. I will offer a brief overview of our subject from a biblical and theological perspective, with some practical suggestions at the conclusion of our conversation. But if suicide is a very real issue for you, I urge you to seek professional help immediately. Our pastoral care staff can support you in finding the assistance you need, today.

Much confusion abounds in our society regarding the theological and spiritual dimensions of suicide. Is this the "unpardonable sin"? Can those who take their lives still be in heaven? Why does God permit such a tragedy? How can faith sustain us in this hardest of all times?

## The history of suicide

The term "suicide" is traced in the *Oxford English Dictionary* to 1651; its first occurrence is apparently in Sir Thomas Browne's *Religion Medici*, written in 1635 and published in 1642. Before it became a common term, expressions such as "self-murder" and "self-killing" were used to describe the act of taking one's own life.

In Greek and Roman antiquity, suicide was accepted and even seen by some as an honorable means of death and the attainment of immediate salvation. Stoics and others influenced by them saw suicide as the triumph of an individual over fate. Socrates' decision to take his own life rather than violate the state's sentence of execution influenced many to see the act as noble. However, he also made clear that we belong to the gods and cannot end our lives unless they wish it so (Plato, *Phaedo* 62bc).

Many of the early Christians knew they would likely die for their faith, but chose to follow Christ at any cost. These deaths are not usually considered "suicide," since they were not initiated by the person but accepted as a consequence of his or her commitment to Jesus.

Augustine (A.D. 354-430) was the strongest opponent of any form of self-murder (cf. *City of God* 1:4-26). He appealed to the Sixth Commandment and its prohibition against murder. And he agreed with Socrates that our lives belong to God, so that we have no

right to end them ourselves. Over time, many in the Church would see self-murder as an unpardonable sin (see the discussion of the Catholic Church's position below).

In the nineteenth century, social scientists began to view suicide as a social issue, and as a symptom of larger dysfunction in the community and/or home. Medical doctors began to identify depression and other disorders behind the act. Suicide became decriminalized, so that the individual could be buried, his family not disinherited, and a survivor not prosecuted.

Many are confused about this difficult subject, as our society and its churches have adopted such a wide variety of positions on it. So let's discuss biblical teachings on the issue, the Catholic position, a Baptist response, and practical help for those dealing with this tragic issue.

## **The Bible and suicide**

God's word does not use the word "suicide," but it has much to say on our subject.

### *Biblical occurrences*

The Old Testament records five clear suicides:

- When Abimelech was mortally wounded by a woman who dropped a millstone on his head, he cried to his armor-bearer to kill him so his death would not be credited to the woman (Judges 9:54).
- The mortally wounded King Saul fell upon his own sword lest the Philistines abuse him further (1 Samuel 31:4).
- Saul's armor-bearer then took his own life as well (1 Samuel 31:5).
- Ahithophel hanged himself after his advice was no longer followed by King David's son Absalom (2 Samuel 17:23).
- Zimri set himself afire after his rebellion failed (1 Kings 16:18).

Additionally, some consider Jonah to have attempted suicide (Jonah 1:11-15). And Samson destroyed the Philistine temple, killing himself and all those with him (Judges 16:29-30). But many do not see this as a suicide as much an act of military bravery.

The death of Judas is the only clear example of suicide in the New Testament (Matthew 27:3-10). Paul later prevented the suicide of the Philippian jailer and won him to Christ (Acts 16:27-28).

Some consider Jesus' death to have been a kind of suicide, since he made clear: "No one takes [my life] from me, but I lay it down of my own accord" (John 10:18; all references are from the New International Version). However, as the divine Son of God, he could only have been killed, by any means, with his permission.

### *Biblical principles*

God's word makes clear the sanctity of life:

- "You shall not murder" (Exodus 20:13).

- "This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live" (Deuteronomy 30:19).
- "The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised" (Job 1:21).
- "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body" (1 Corinthians 6:19-20).
- "No one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church" (Ephesians 5:29).

There are times when believers may have to give their lives in the service of Christ and his Kingdom (cf. Mark 8:34-36; John 13:37; Philippians 1:21-22). But voluntary martyrdom is not usually considered "suicide."

Our postmodern culture believes that absolute truth does not exist (itself an absolute truth claim). In a nontheistic or relativistic society, it is difficult to argue for life and against suicide. If we are our own "higher power," we can do with our lives what we want.

But if God is the Lord of all that is, he retains ownership over our lives and their days. He is the only one who can determine when our service is done, our intended purpose fulfilled. It is the clear and consistent teaching of Scripture that our lives belong to their Maker, and that we are not to end them for our own purposes.

## **Suicide and the Catholic Church**

Does this fact mean that suicide costs Christians their salvation? Most of the theological questions I have been asked in this regard relate in some way to the Catholic Church's teachings on the subject. The Catholic Catechism contains several statements regarding suicide and mortal sin (all italics are in the original).

### ***Suicide***

On suicide, the Church does not maintain that taking one's own life always leads to eternity in hell, as these statements make clear:

#2280 Everyone is responsible for his life before God who has given it to him. It is God who remains the sovereign Master of life. We are obliged to accept life gratefully and preserve it for his honor and the salvation of our souls. We are stewards, not owners, of the life God has entrusted to us. It is not ours to dispose of.

#2281 Suicide contradicts the natural inclination of the human being to preserve and perpetuate his life. It is gravely contrary to the just love of self. It likewise offends love of neighbor because it unjustly breaks the ties of solidarity with family, nation, and other human societies to which we continue to have obligations. Suicide is contrary to love for the living God.

#2282 If suicide is committed with the intention of setting an example, especially to the young, it also takes on the gravity of scandal. Voluntary co-operation in suicide is contrary to the moral law.

Grave psychological disturbances, anguish, or grave fear of hardship, suffering, or torture can diminish the responsibility of the one committing suicide.

#2283 We should not despair of the eternal salvation of persons who have taken their own lives. By ways known to him alone, God can provide the opportunity for salutary repentance. The Church prays for persons who have taken their own lives.

### ***Mortal sin***

The Church maintains a distinction between "mortal" and "venial" sins. The former separate us from God's grace; the latter, while serious, do not. The Catechism states:

#1037 God predestines no one to go to hell; for this, a willful turning away from God (a mortal sin) is necessary, and persistence in it until the end. In the Eucharistic liturgy and in the daily prayers of her faithful, the Church implores the mercy of God, who does not want "any to perish, but all to come to repentance."

#1859 Mortal sin requires *full knowledge* and *complete consent*. It presupposes knowledge of the sinful character of the act, of its opposition to God's law. It also implies a consent sufficiently deliberate to be a personal choice. Feigned ignorance and hardness of heart do not diminish, but rather increase, the voluntary character of a sin.

#1860 *Unintentional ignorance* can diminish or even remove the imputability of a grave offense. But no one is deemed to be ignorant of the principles of the moral law, which are written in the conscience of every man. The promptings of feelings and passions can also diminish the voluntary and free character of the offense, as can external pressures or pathological disorders. Sin committed through malice, by deliberate choice of evil, is the gravest.

#1861 Mortal sin is a radical possibility of human freedom, as is love itself. It results in the loss of charity and the privation of sanctifying grace, that is, of the state of grace. If it is not redeemed by repentance and God's forgiveness, it causes exclusion from Christ's kingdom and the eternal death of hell, for our freedom has the power to make choices for ever, with no turning back. However, although we can judge that an act is in itself a grave offense, we must entrust judgment of persons to the justice and mercy of God.

#2268 The fifth commandment forbids *direct and intentional killing* as gravely sinful. The murderer and those who cooperate voluntarily in murder commit a sin that cries out to heaven for vengeance.

#1470 ...it is only by the road of conversion that we can enter the Kingdom, from which one is excluded by grave sin. In converting to Christ through penance and faith, the sinner passes from death to life and "does not come into judgment."

### ***Theological results***

From the above statements the following principles of Catholic theology seem clear:

- We cannot be sure of the spiritual state of the person who commits suicide. This person may be suffering from "grave psychological disturbances" which "can diminish the responsibility of the one committing suicide" (#2282). Mortal sin requires "full knowledge and complete consent" (#1859), and can be diminished by unintentional ignorance (#1860).
- Thus the Church "should not despair of the eternal salvation of persons who have taken their own lives" (#2283).
- However, if the person was fully aware of his or her actions, without suffering "grave psychological disturbances," this person committed murder, an act which is "gravely sinful" (#2268).
- A person who commits a mortal sin and demonstrates "persistence in it until the end" goes to hell (#1037).

Since a person who commits self-murder (suicide) cannot then repent of this sin, it is logical to conclude that this person cannot be saved from hell. However, the Catechism nowhere makes this conclusion explicit.

### **Suicide and the security of our salvation**

Most Baptists (and most Protestants) do not believe that it is possible for a Christian to lose his or her salvation, even if that person commits suicide. Here is a summary of the typical Baptist position on the subject of "eternal security."

#### ***Know what you can know***

The Bible assures us, "I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life" (1 John 5:13). A literal translation would be, "We can actually and with full assurance know intellectually and personally that we have eternal life." This phrase does not mean that we gradually grow into assurance, but that we can possess here and now a present certainty of the life we have already received in Jesus.

But first we must "believe in the name of the Son of God." "Believe" means more than intellectual assent--it is the biblical word for personal trust and commitment. I can assent to the fact that an airplane will fly me from Dallas to Atlanta, but I must get on board before it can. No surgeon can operate on the basis of intellectual assent--we must submit to the procedure.

If you have, you can claim the biblical fact that you "have eternal life," present tense, right now. You are already immortal. Jesus promised, "whoever lives and believes in me will never die" (John 11:26). We simply step from time into eternity, from this life to the next.

Nowhere does the Bible say how it feels to become the child of God, because our feelings can depend on the pizza we had for supper or the weather outside the window. No circumstances or events can guarantee our salvation. It takes as much faith to believe I am a Christian today as it did to become one more than thirty years ago. I still haven't seen God, or proven my salvation in a test tube. If I had, I could question the reality and veracity of what I saw or thought. So could you.

Either the Bible is true or it is false. Either God keeps his word or he does not. He promises that if you "believe in the name of the Son of God," you "have eternal life" This moment. You cannot lose your salvation, for you are already the immortal child of God. This is the fact of God's word.

### ***What about "falling from grace"?***

Those who believe that it is possible to trust in Christ and then lose our salvation are quick to quote Hebrews 6:4-6. These interpreters assume that the text speaks of people who have experienced a genuine conversion, then "fall away" (v. 6). They typically believe that such a person needs another salvation experience. But others disagree.

Some believe that the writer is stating a hypothetical case: if genuine Christians "fall away," then "it is impossible" for them "to be brought back to repentance" (vs. 4, 6). Not that they can in fact fall from salvation, but if they could, they could not be saved again. Note that if the text deals with a Christian who actually falls from faith, it teaches that the person has no chance to be saved again.

Others (myself among them) believe that the writer is speaking not of a Christian but of someone who considers the faith, perhaps even joining a church, but then rejects Christ. If such a person persists in unbelief, he cannot then be saved. If a person claims that he once trusted Christ but does so no more, I would believe that he was never a genuine Christian.

The Bible seems clearly to teach that a Christian is forever the child of God:

- "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).
- "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!" (2 Corinthians 5:17).
- "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand" (John 10:27-29).
- "Whoever lives and believes in me will never die" (John 11:26).

### ***What about the "unpardonable sin"?***

Jesus has just healed a demon-possessed man. The crowds think he might be the Messiah, but the Pharisees say that he drives out demons by the devil himself. So Jesus responds, "the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven" (Matthew 12:31). He repeats his warning: "Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come" (v. 32).

Peter could deny Jesus, Thomas could doubt him, and Paul could persecute his followers, yet they could be forgiven. But "blasphemy against the Spirit" cannot be forgiven, now or at any point in the future. This is the "unpardonable sin."

So, what is this sin? Let's set out what we know. We know that Christians cannot commit this sin. 1 John 1:9 is clear: "if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." "All" means all. No sin is unpardonable for a Christian.

We know that this sin relates to the work of the Holy Spirit in regard to unbelievers. Jesus is warning the Pharisees, those who rejected him, that they are in danger of this sin. So what does the Spirit do with non-Christians?

- He convicts them of their sin and need for salvation: "When [the Spirit] comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin, and righteousness and judgment: in regard to sin, because men do not believe in me" (John 16:8-9).
- He tells them about Christ their Savior: "When the Counselor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father, he will testify about me" (John 15:26).
- He explains salvation: "The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Corinthians 2:14).
- When they confess their sins and turn to Christ, the Spirit makes them God's children: "If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ. . . . And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you" (Romans 8:9, 11).

In short, the Holy Spirit leads lost people to salvation.

So we know that it is the "unpardonable sin" to refuse the Spirit's work in leading you to salvation. To be convicted of your sin and need for a savior, but refuse to admit it. To be presented the gospel but reject it.

Why is this sin unpardonable? Because accepting salvation through Christ is the only means by which our sins can be pardoned. It is "unpardonable" to reject the only surgery which can save your life, or the only chemotherapy which can cure your cancer. Not

because the doctor doesn't want to heal you, but because he cannot. You won't let him. You have rejected the only means of health and salvation.

The unpardonable sin is rejecting the Holy Spirit's offer of salvation, and dying in such a state of rejection. Then you have refused the only pardon God is able to give you. Don't do that. Be sure you have made Christ your Lord, today.

### ***Suicide and salvation***

To conclude this part of our conversation: no verse of Scripture connects suicide with our eternal destiny. If this act could cause us to lose our salvation, I believe the Bible would make that fact clear. To the contrary, we can neither earn nor lose our salvation by human actions: "it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God--not by works, so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Suicide is a tragedy for all involved, including our Father in heaven. But the Bible nowhere teaches that it costs Christians their salvation.

### **Suicide and the grace of God**

Those who consider suicide, and those who lose someone to it, often struggle with the presence of God in the midst of such pain. Why does he allow such suffering?

"How can a good God allow bad things to happen" is a problem as old as the Garden of Eden and the flood of Noah, Christian theologians have wrestled with it all through the history of our faith. Five basic approaches have been proposed most often.

### ***The free-will theodicy***

Augustine (AD 354-430) is usually considered the greatest Christian theologian after Paul. His approach to the problem of evil and suffering can be summarized as follows:

- God created all that is.
- All that he created is good.
- Before the fall, evil was therefore "non-being," potential to be chosen but not yet reality.
- God created humanity with freedom of will.
- We used this freedom to choose evil.
- Our choice brought evil into existence, absolving God of blame.

There is much in Scripture to commend Augustine's approach. God gave us freedom of will (Genesis 3:15-17; Exodus 32:26; Deuteronomy 30:19; Joshua 24:15; 1 Kings 18:21). We were given this freedom so we could choose God and good (Matthew 4:10; Proverbs 1:10; 4:14; Romans 6:13; Ephesians 6:13; 2 Peter 3:17). Our free choice for wrong led to evil (James 1:13-15; 4:1). All people are now sinners (Romans 3:23). Our sin has resulted in a fallen world (Genesis 3:17; Romans 8:22).

Whenever evil is the product of our sinful choices, Augustine's approach explains its existence without blaming God. Applied to the question of suicide, this position would remind us that the Sovereign of the universe has chosen to limit himself to our God-given freedom. If we misuse our freedom, the fault is not with God but ourselves.

However, this approach does not account adequately for innocent suffering. Augustine would argue (correctly) that a tsunami is the product of a world which "fell" because of sin. But he could not explain why it would devastate Southeast Asia rather than some other part of the planet, or why so many innocent children would be affected. A philosopher will also ask, if man was created good by nature, why did he choose to sin? If God gave us freedom of will and knew how we would choose to use it, is he not responsible for its use (at least to some degree)?

Related to suicide caused by clinical depression, this approach cannot explain why such a disease has to exist, or why it had to affect the person in question. The free-will approach helps us understand why a person who chooses to abuse alcohol might die in a drunk driving accident. But it doesn't explain why the innocent driver of the other car had to die as well.

### ***The spiritual warfare model***

Satan is very real. He murders and lies (John 8:44). He accuses the people of God (Job 1:9-11), resists the godly (Zechariah 3:1; Matthew 13:38-39), and tempts us to sin (1 Chronicles 21:1; Matthew 4:1). He has power over unbelievers (Acts 26:18; 2 Corinthians 4:3-4). He is a "roaring lion looking for someone to devour" (1 Peter 5:8).

As a result, much of the evil and suffering in the world is attributable to his malignant work. Paul was clear: "our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Ephesians 6:12).

However, not all suffering is the direct result of Satan's work. We live in a fallen world, in which natural disasters and disease are inevitable. People misuse their free will, as we have seen. God permits some suffering for our greater good (see the third approach). Satan would like us to attribute all evil to him, giving him too much power; or blame nothing on him, pretending he doesn't exist. The right approach is to ask the Lord if there is a Satanic component to our suffering, and trust that he will guide us to the truth. If we are under attack, we can claim the power of God over our enemy and find victory in his Spirit and strength.

In relating this approach to the question of suicide, we can know that Satan is a "murderer from the beginning" (John 8:44). He wants to destroy us. He will use our freedom to tempt us, but he cannot make us commit suicide. The choice is still ours

### ***The soul-building model***

Irenaeus (ca. AD 120-ca. 200) proposed an alternative approach to our problem:

- God created us to develop into perfect relationship with himself.
- He created the world as a place for that development.
- Evil is thus necessary as a means of our spiritual development ("soul-building").

The Bible does teach that some suffering comes from God (Deuteronomy 8:5; Job 16:12; Psalm 66:11; 90:7). We know that suffering can lead to good (Job 23:10; Psalm 119:67; 2 Corinthians 4:17; Hebrews 12:11; Revelation 7:14). Suffering can lead us to repentance (Jeremiah 7:3, 5, 7), and can refine us (Psalm 66:10; Isaiah 48:10; Malachi 3:3; 1 Peter 1:7; 4:17). Pain enables us to witness to our faith in God despite the hurt (2 Peter 2:12, 15; 3:15-16). And so God promises to use even difficult experiences for our good, to make us more like Jesus (Romans 8:28-29).

Irenaeus explains how evil could exist before Adam and Eve chose it. His approach also affirms the hope that God can redeem any suffering for his glory and our good. Problems with this approach include the fact that the "fall" it pictures is not as catastrophic as the event described in Genesis 3.

The amount of evil in the world seems disproportionate to the present good; for instance, it is hard to argue that the lessening of anti-Semitism which resulted from the Holocaust justifies the horrors of that tragedy. This approach also struggles with the existence of Hell, since it is not a soul-building or redemptive reality.

As related to suicide, this approach may help us understand that God can redeem depression for his glory and our good. He can even use the horrific tragedy of a suicide to help people follow him in faith. He did not cause this pain, but he can redeem it.

### ***The eschatological model***

"Eschatology" deals with the future. Applied to theodicy, this approach asserts that evil will be resolved in the future, making present suffering endurable and worthwhile. Jesus promised that life leads to life eternal in glory (John 14:1-6), a paradise beyond our imagination (Revelation 21:1-5). We need not consider the present sufferings worth comparing with the glory to be revealed (Romans 8:18).

As a philosophical model, this approach offers the guarantee of absolute rational understanding. We do not comprehend the purpose of suffering now, but we will one day (1 Corinthians 13:12). All our questions will be answered. All the reasons why God has permitted suffering in our lives will be clarified. Our present faithfulness will be redeemed with future reward in glory (Revelation 2:10).

This approach does not offer explanation in the present. And some might wonder how this promise of future hope makes present courage possible. But it does promise that the questions we cannot answer today will have their answers one day.

### ***The existential model***

The last model is more practical than theoretical: God suffers as we suffer, and gives us strength to withstand and even redeem our pain. The Bible affirms this assertion (2

Corinthians 4:1, 16; Ephesians 3:13; Hebrews 12:5; Revelation 2:3). God walks with us through the valley of the shadow of death (Psalm 23:4). He weeps as we weep (John 11:35). Jesus experienced every temptation and pain we feel (Hebrews 4:15). He is present with us now in the sufferings of life (Deuteronomy 20:1; Psalm 34:18; Isaiah 43:2; Daniel 3:24-25; 12:6-7; Acts 16:25-26).

Philosophically, this approach is not a true theodicy. It offers no real explanation for the origin or existence of suffering. But it does provide the practical assurance that our Father walks with his children through the hardest places of life, and will never allow us to face more than he will give us the strength to bear (1 Corinthians 10:13).

Your Father suffers as you suffer. If you feel pain, so does he. He knows what it is to lose a child, for he lost his Son on the cross. He will walk with us through the valley of the shadow of death (Psalm 23:4) until he leads us all the way home.

### ***Practical principles***

When the tragedy of suicide strikes, how can this theological discussion help us in practical ways? Here are steps to take in the worst storms of life.

First, utilize the *free-will* approach to examine the origin of this suffering. Is there sin to admit? Is this pain in some way the result of misused freedom? If you are not sure, you may ask the Father. Where sin is part of the problem, we can claim God's forgiving grace (1 John 1:9) and make restitution to others when doing so is to their good (Luke 19:8). But do not assume that suffering is always the fault of sin. Joseph, Job, and Jesus are clear evidence to the contrary.

Second, use the *soul-building* model to ask: what can you learn from this situation? How can you grow closer to God through this pain? Strive to be open to every source from which this spiritual growth can come--ask friends for counsel, seek the Spirit in prayer and Scripture, worship God even (especially) when it's hard. Stay close enough to Jesus to hear his voice and feel his transforming touch.

Third, use the *future hope* approach to ask: how can God redeem this present suffering for future good? How can he use your witness to touch the lives of people you may not even know? How will he reward your present faithfulness in the future and in glory? You may not be able to see the future, but you can believe that it is real.

Last, utilize the *existential* model to trust God's help in the midst of your pain. Know that he loves you, no matter how the world assesses or treats you. He will always be your Father, if you have asked Jesus Christ to be your Lord. Nothing can take you from his hand (John 10:28). He will enable you to get through this dark night, until the dawn finally comes.

Above all, make certain that you have entered a personal relationship with your Creator and Father. Be sure that you have asked him to forgive your sins and failures, and to become your Lord and Savior.

This simple prayer captures the essence of a salvation commitment: "Dear Lord, thank you for loving me. Thank you for sending your Son to die on the cross to pay the penalty for my sins. I turn from them now, and ask you to forgive me for them. I invite Jesus Christ into my life as my Savior and Lord. I turn my life over to him. I will live for him as long as I live. Thank you for making me your child forever. In Jesus' name, Amen."

If you prayed this prayer for the first time just now, please tell a Christian you can trust. As God's child, you need to be part of his family. His church can help you grow in your faith and stand with you in the hard times of life. Whomever you trust with your decision to follow Jesus, know that you are now the child of God for all eternity.

### **For those considering suicide**

People consider suicide when the pain they feel exceeds their ability to cope with it. They want to end their suffering, and think that ending their lives will bring relief.

A trained professional is the very best person to speak with someone who is considering suicide. If you know someone who is feeling that they cannot go on, or if you're feeling that way yourself, the best thing you can do is speak with a counselor. That person can help find ways to decrease the pain or discover ways of coping with it. Our church staff can make recommendations, as can the various help lines which are available by telephone or Internet today.

In the meanwhile, it is important to know that it is possible to get through this. *Feeling* suicidal does not require that we act on our feeling. The best thing to do immediately is to create some space. If we decide not to act on our feelings for even a few minutes or a day, we can find the strength to seek help. By seeking help we can deal with the pain and find the hope we need.

### ***Warning signs***

More than 90% of those who commit suicide suffered from a significant psychiatric illness at the time of their death. Chronic major depression is by far the leading cause of suicide. This brain illness causes the person not to think as healthy people think, and often leads him or her to believe that suicide is the only way to stop the pain. Alcohol or drug use compound this problem and increase the risk of suicide greatly.

Common indicators that a person needs immediate help:

- Those who threaten to hurt or kill themselves, or talk of wanting to hurt or kill themselves.
- Those looking for ways to kill themselves by seeking access to firearms, available pills, or other means.
- Those talking or writing about death, dying or suicide, when these actions are out of the ordinary for them.

Research has identified these specific risk factors for suicide:

- Previous suicide attempt(s)
- History of mental disorders, particularly depression
- History of alcohol and substance abuse
- Family history of suicide (depression is often genetic)
- Family history of child maltreatment
- Feelings of hopelessness
- Impulsive or aggressive tendencies
- Barriers to accessing mental health treatment
- Loss (relational, social, work, financial, etc.)
- Physical illness
- Easy access to lethal methods
- Unwillingness to seek help due to stigma attached to mental health, substance abuse disorders, or suicidal thoughts
- Cultural and religious beliefs, such as the belief that suicide is a noble way to die
- Local epidemics of suicide
- Isolation, a sense of being cut off from others.

If you or someone you know matches these characteristics, it is vital to seek qualified help today.

### ***Protective factors***

The following indicators help buffer people from the risks associated with suicide:

- Effective clinical care for mental, physical, and substance abuse disorders
- Easy access to clinical interventions and support for those seeking help
- Family and community support
- Support from ongoing medical and mental health care relationships
- Skills in problem solving, conflict resolution, and nonviolent ways of handling disputes
- Cultural and religious beliefs which discourage suicide and encourage self-preservation instincts.

Help those you care about to experience these positive influences, and you'll do much to prevent the tragedy of suicide.

### **Conclusion**

This essay has discussed some of the most difficult subjects in all of faith and life. We have considered the tragedy of suicide in historical, biblical, theological, and practical perspective. Let's conclude with a promise which applies to you and every person you know, and most especially to those affected by this tragic issue:

Fear not, for I have redeemed you;

I have summoned you by name; you are mine.

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;

and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you.

When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned;  
the flames will not set you ablaze.  
For I am the Lord, your God,  
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior (Isaiah 43:1-3).

No matter how deep the water or hot the fire, he is still our Father. This is the promise of God.

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