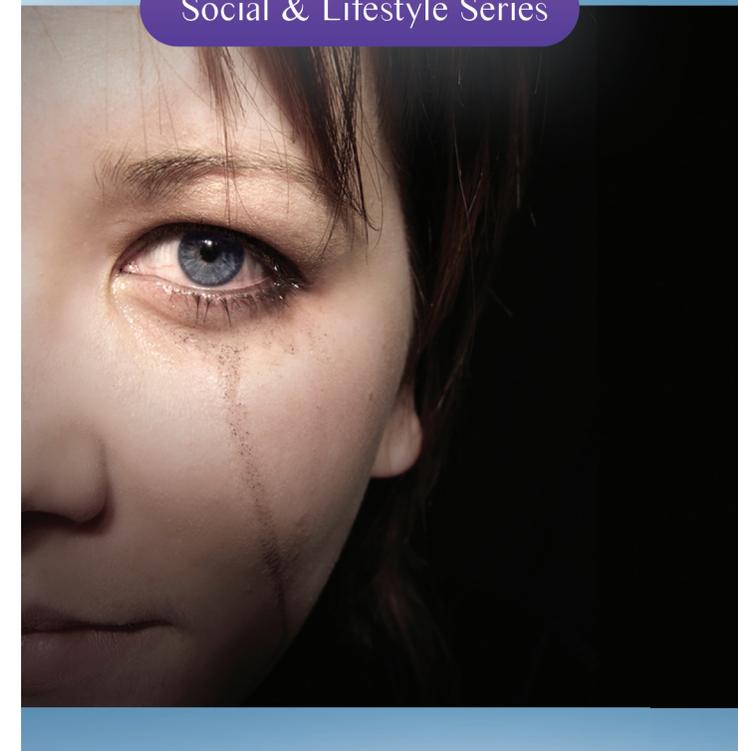


What Should We Think About Suicide?

Social & Lifestyle Series



of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him, we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, as you help us by your prayers.”

There are options you can't see, and there is hope waiting to break into your despair and anger. You may not be able to see these options or that hope at that moment, and you need help from someone else. Talk to someone you can trust who knows Jesus.

When Someone You Love Commits Suicide

The sense of loss and grief is compounded by the fact that the loved one died by choice, even if he or she didn't feel there was a choice. That they chose to leave us creates feelings of anger, guilt, and betrayal. We are angry at them for leaving, and we feel guilty for being angry. And, like it or not, we feel that their suicide is a rejection of the relationship they had with us. We take it personally.

At this point, the worst thing we could do is to be silent and isolate ourselves. The best thing is to talk to someone we trust about the distressing feelings. In fact, retelling the story must happen often, because in the retelling, our grief is processed and the healing comes. In the retelling, we also discover that we are not the only ones who have lost a loved one through suicide. It is very comforting to hear Christian brothers and sisters tell us they have been there, too. We are not alone.

Survivors almost always ask the same question: “Could I have done more?” “Could I have prevented this from happening?” “What if...?” The answer is that everybody could have done more. The question is, would it have

been enough? Would 24-hour surveillance have been enough? At some point, we must deliberately stop second-guessing ourselves and return responsibility for the death back to the one who made it happen. This is not the cruel blaming of the dead, but rather a realistic perspective that allows us to keep living.

Conclusion

Suicide is not an automatic ticket to hell. While it is wrong and a sin, the underlying sin is one we all struggle with—lack of faith. None of us can afford to point fingers or presume to know the eternal destiny of someone who commits suicide (Deut. 29:29). Neither can we afford to hide its tragedy under a cloak of pious normality. We must bring it to the light, talk about it, and allow the survivors to retell the story without us growing weary.

Finally, it is important to understand that God is bigger than suicide. He is not derailed by our grief or our loved one's suicide. He is full of compassion and a desire to help those who remain behind. In our anger, depression, denial, and sorrow, he is a constant presence. He isn't put off by our questions, our anger, or our inability even to pray. He is there.

“I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future” (Jer. 29:11). ■

Written by Mark Johnson.

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¹Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (SCM Press, 1971), 143.



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Faith and Life

What Should We Think About Suicide?

It happened at 3:30 on a Sunday morning. The sound of the telephone pulled me out of the comfort of a good night's sleep. After I croaked out a "Hello?" Marty's (names have been changed) tense voice jolted me awake. "Jim's dead. He shot himself." A hundred questions, none of them coherent enough to speak, filled my mind. Jim had, to the best of my knowledge, become a Christian a few months before. I was counselling him, and he seemed to be growing and changing. What had happened?

I don't remember much of that Sunday morning except the utter shock of the congregation when I announced Jim's death. His suicide prompted a personal search that is not yet over. If you are contemplating suicide, please understand that there are other options besides taking your own life.

Suicide is ugly. The devastation that suicide leaves on those who are left behind is often compounded by some beliefs that are not necessarily a reflection of the truth. What does the Bible say about suicide? How can we respond to suicide with the heart of Christ? How do we help those who have been left behind?

Suicide in the Bible

In the Old Testament, there are four clear cases of suicide and one suicide/revenge killing (Samson, Judg. 16; Saul and his armour

bearer, 1 Sam. 31; Ahithophel, 2 Sam. 16-17; Zimri, 1 Kings 16). The New Testament contains the account of Judas (Matt. 27). The suicide/revenge killing is a familiar story. Samson, a captive, blinded by the Philistines, found himself in a position in which he could cause many Philistine deaths. However, the cost was his own life, which he gave without hesitation (Judg. 16).

Ahithophel (2 Sam. 16-17) was an advisor to King David. When David's son, Absalom, revolted against his father, Ahithophel abandoned David and joined the revolution. He suggested a strategy to Absalom, which would surely have defeated David. His advice went unheeded, however, and Absalom failed in his bid for the kingdom. Ahithophel knew he would be executed as a traitor, his family shamed, and that he would likely experience retaliation. So he went home, "put his house in order, and hanged himself." He was buried in the tomb of his ancestors.

Possibly the best-known suicide is that of Judas Iscariot. Remorseful but not repentant, Judas hanged himself after betraying Jesus (Matt. 27).

Two observations can be made about these suicides. First, they followed some appalling humiliation or military defeat, which would have led to deep shame or disgraceful death. Suicide was chosen as a more "honourable death," although whether it ended up being more honourable is debatable.

Second, there is no place in the Bible where the act of suicide is directly condemned. If there is an indictment, it is on what led up to the suicide. This does not mean, of course, that suicide is sanctioned. Suicide is wrong and a sin, but it is not an unforgivable sin. Unfortunately, this has not always been understood by the church.

Suicide and the Church

It may surprise many of today's Christians to discover that the first Christian leader to condemn suicide explicitly was Augustine, around AD 415. He understood the sixth commandment ("You shall not murder") to include suicide. To understand suicide as self-murder was without precedent in the earlier church.

It should be mentioned that Augustine had a great deal of difficulty with a number of Christian women who, in earlier centuries, had chosen to commit suicide rather than face persecution through sexual violation. These women were considered martyrs, and Augustine could not agree. He introduced a number of exceptions and explanations in order to defend his position.

One unfortunate addition to the understanding of suicide as self-murder has to do with the nature of forgiveness. The reasoning runs like this: Since suicide is a sin, and since the one committing suicide dies before he or she can confess and repent of that sin, he or she is condemned to an eternity in hell for that unconfessed sin. This reasoning shows a lack of understanding about the nature of forgiveness and Christ's death on the cross.

If God forgives us only on a confession-by-confession basis, then none of us would escape hell. In Ephesians 1:7-8, we find that "in [Jesus] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding."

"Suicide is that lack of faith which takes no account of the living God."

DIETRICH BONHOEFFER

Our forgiveness is found in a relationship with Jesus Christ, based on his death and resurrection, not on our own ability to remember and confess every sin we commit. Those who have a relationship with God through Jesus Christ have been forgiven. Sadly, however, we still struggle with our sinful natures (Rom. 7:14-25; Gal. 5:16-18), and some of us commit suicide.

Yes, we must see suicide as sin. Our lives belong to God and we don't have the right to end them. In 1 Corinthians 6:19-20, we read: "Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought with a price. Therefore

honour God with your body."

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German pastor who died at the hands of the Nazis, considered suicide to be the sin of lack of faith. It is that lack of faith which "takes no account of the living God. Lack of faith does not perceive, beyond the gift of bodily life, the Creator and Lord who alone has the right to dispose of his creation." Since "everything that does not come from faith is sin" (Rom. 14:23b), we had better look carefully at ourselves before we pass judgment on the eternal destiny of someone who has committed suicide.

If You Are Contemplating Suicide

Listen to someone who has felt what you are feeling. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 1:8-11: "We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence

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