

## SUICIDE

“It was suicide.”

The reality of this action is so painful for family member and friends. It differs greatly when death results from ageing, an accident, various diseases, or violence (war, terrorism, crime). But when there is a suicide, many have a tendency not to talk about it or seek professional help.

Suicide fosters a number of questions:

How could this have happened?

Did we miss something and could have changed the course of the person’s life?

Have they committed the unpardonable sin by this “self-murder”?

Why did they think there was no reason to go on living?

According to the World Health Organization “Close to 800,000 people worldwide die by suicide every year, which is one per every 40 seconds. . . . There are indications that for each adult who died by suicide there may have been more than 20 others attempting suicide.”<sup>1</sup>

Rather than become bogged down with the broad base of statistics which are available, just a few are being offered. In the years to come, the specific number and trends very likely will change. However, at this point consider these realities. On June 18, 2019, *Health Day News* reported a spike in suicide rates to the highest point in two decades. Oren Miron, a research associate at Harvard Medical school in Boston, stated that “the suicide rates for 15 to 19 year-olds and those between 20 and 24 are at their highest level since 2000.”<sup>2</sup> The surge for boys was up 14% between 2015 and 2017. Suicide rates for girls rose 8% annually between 2000 and 2017. Suggested reasons for this include the opioid epidemic and bullying through social media.<sup>3</sup> A January 21, 2020, *Wall Street Journal* article stated that the Center For Disease Control and Prevention released data indicating the suicide rate in the United States “jumped 39% between 2007 and 2017, the most recent data at hand.”<sup>4</sup>

It’s fairly easy to share minimal concern about others committing suicide until it comes home to our circle of family, friends, and acquaintances. Further complicating it for us is when this person is a believer or a spiritual leader. We are shocked when, within the space of several

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<sup>1</sup> “Mental Health Suicide Data” World Health Organization, Accessed January 16, 2020, [https://www.who.int/mental\\_health/prevention/suicide/suicide\\_prevent/en/](https://www.who.int/mental_health/prevention/suicide/suicide_prevent/en/).

<sup>2</sup> Dennis Thompson, “U.S. Youth Suicide Rate Reaches a 20-year High,” *US News*, June 18, 2019, <https://www.usnews.com/news/health-news/articles/2019-06-18/us-youth-suicide-rate-reaches-20-year-high>. Accessed January 16, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Dan Lovett. “Churches Struggle With Mental Health” *Wall Street Journal*. January 21, 2020.

years, six pastors, all serving in larger congregations, choose to end their lives. Along with questioning why there always is the question of, “What is this person’s spiritual destiny?”

## DEFINITIONS

Looking for a definition of suicide quickly leads one to a simple listing. These include “death with dignity,” “aid in dying,” “hastening,” and “self-deliverance.”<sup>5</sup> Such labels definitely provide a limited perspective or overview on this serious personal action. In his book, *Why People Die By Suicide*, Thomas Joiner offers the following definition: “The act of killing oneself intentionally.”<sup>6</sup> Another approach is to define suicide as an individual’s choosing to be sovereign over one’s right to live or to die.

Further complicating the definition is when a variety of situational descriptives are added. These reflect mental, physical, and political aspects attached to the term.<sup>7</sup> They include suicide bombers, suicide by lifestyle, murder-suicide, honorable suicide, protest suicide, suicide by cop, bullied suicide, and suicide as escape.

Not to be overlooked is the description of “physician assisted suicide.” Immediately this brings to our attention Dr. Jack Kevorkian and his 1968 Volkswagon van rigged to enable gravely ill and incapacitated individuals to initiate the process of their death. His self-made suicide machine, often referred to as the “death machine” provided the means of assisting over 100-plus patients, according to his claim, to initiate their death. His arrest and resulting eight-year prison term resulted from a videotape of Kevorkian personally administering a lethal injection to a Lou Gehrig’s patient.

One simple definition which will be considered in another section is “self-murder.” This has been the dominant perspective within Christianity for centuries.

## SCRIPTURE

There are seven individuals in Scripture whose actions either fit or come close to the concept of suicide by the setting and manner of their death. They will be considered in chronological order as they appear in the Scriptures.

The first is Abimelech, the son of Gideon by his concubine. His desire to cement the position of King of Shechem is seen when he apparently sacrificed seventy male relatives who could have rights to the throne. Only one male, Jotham, escaped. After a three-year reign, an insurrection was mounted against him. Abimelech attempted to repulse it, but in the process, a woman dropped a millstone from a tower striking him. Knowing his wound was fatal and not

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<sup>5</sup> Heidi Johnson. Unpublished Doctoral Thesis. “Preaching for Suicide Awareness: A Pedagogical Experiment in Teaching Preachers to Engage the Topic of Suicide From the Pulpit,” 20,21.

<sup>6</sup>Thomas Joiner. *Why People Die by Suicide*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005) 27.

<sup>7</sup> Johnson, “Preaching for Suicide Awareness: A Pedagogical Experiment in Teaching Preachers to Engage the Topic of Suicide From the Pulpit,” 20,21.

wanting his legacy to include the shame of being killed by a woman, he requested that his armor bearer kill him. His armor bearer fulfilled the request (see Judges 9).

The well-known story of Samson, a one man fighting army, sadly ends with his death through collapsing the main pillars of the temple in which the rulers of the Philistines had gathered. Though blinded and working in a grinding mill, his hair, symbol of his strength, grew. God granted his request to make one final blow against the Philistines and avenge his eyes (see Judges 16).

Next in the listing is King Saul and his armor bearer. In a fierce battle with the Philistines he was critically wounded. Not wanting to be abused and then killed by the enemy he requested his armor bearer to kill him. When the young man refused, Saul fell on his own sword. Seeing his King dead, this young man did the same (see 1 Samuel 31:1-5).

Chronologically following the previous four is Ahithophel, the main counselor of David. For some unstated reason he chose to join Absalom's rebellion against his father. Previously, his advice had been described in 2 Samuel 16:23 as, "The advice Ahithophel gave was like that of one who inquires of God (NIV)." When his advice to strike a quick decisive blow against the fleeing King David was disregarded, he understood the tide had turned. He knew he would be found guilty of treason. After putting his affairs in order, he hanged himself (see 2 Samuel 17:23).

After assassinating Elah, the fourth king of the Northern Kingdom, Zimri took the throne. His reign was a short seven days. When Omri revolted against him and Zimri saw his defeat coming shortly, he chose to burn down the palace over himself (see I Kings 16:9-20).

The seventh and final individual is Judas. Very likely he is the best known due to his treasonable betrayal of Jesus. Filled with remorse for his actions against Jesus, he attempts to return the bribe price of silver to the priests and elders. Upon their refusal to accept it, he threw the silver on the temple floor and then proceeded to hang himself (see Matthew 27:1-5).

It is of interest that Scripture remains silent in each case other than sharing the narrative. No discussion of mediating circumstances or condemnation of the suicide action can be found. It would be so much easier if this had been included to help us spiritually interpret these events.

Samson alone stands out from each of the other individuals who participated in personal suicide. When the angel of the Lord announced to his barren mother that she would conceive a son, the express purpose for his life was to "begin to deliver Israel out of the hand of the Philistines (Judges 13:5 NKJV). He made a number of sinful choices, yet at his death, he devastated the Philistine national leadership. Three thousand men and women (all the lords) perished when the temple of Dagon was destroyed as Samson, divinely empowered, pushed down the main pillars of the building (Judges 16:26-30). Not to be overlooked is his inclusion in Hebrews 11:32 with other men of faith.

It seems only logical that Samson is not a suicide but a soldier who willingly gives his life for the greater cause of conquest. This heroic action qualifies for being a man of faith rather than an individual only seeking to randomly end his life because of circumstances.

## CONTRIBUTING CAUSES

What stimulates or pushes an individual to consider suicide and then progress on the path to attempting or finalizing the desired result? The following listing derived from a variety of sources and includes statements which are similar, closely related, or even overlap. They include perceived burdensomeness, a perceived state is permanent, old age, lack of self-worth, failed belongingness, an avoidance of abuse (physical, emotional, sexual), escape, depression, mental illness, head injuries, drug and alcohol abuse, culture of honor, act of protest, repeated exposure to injury and danger and unbearable pain.

In the face of these contributing causes, there is one factor which restricts the actions and offers hope. “Spirituality/religion may prevent suicidal behavior through religious doctrines that prohibit suicide and through the meaning, comfort, and support that spiritual communities can provide.”<sup>8</sup> However, as will be discussed at a later point, this does not exempt believers from thinking suicidal, attempting suicide, or even completing the action.

It seems that some consideration should be given to the loss of community. Dysfunctional families create a sense of “Who cares about me?” This easily progresses to: “Is there any reason to live?” Not to be overlooked are the many teens and young adults who attend church but still feel lonely. No one reaches out or speaks to them. In the middle of a crowd they have no communal identity.

## WARNING SIGNS

Not everyone who commits or attempts suicide will demonstrate visible or verbal signs of their intentions. There are, however, some indications which will reveal what may be hiding beneath the surface.<sup>9</sup>

1. Talking about wanting to die or kill oneself
2. Looking for a way to kill oneself
3. Talking about feeling hopeless or having no purpose
4. Talking about feeling trapped or being in unbearable pain
5. Acting anxious, agitated or reckless
6. Withdrawing or feeling isolated
7. Talking about being a burden to others

Notice the correlation between the causes of suicide and the warning signs.

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<sup>8</sup> Regina M. Sherman, Barbara D’ Orio, Miesha N. Rhodes, Stephanie Gantt Johnson, and Nadine J. Kasto, “Racial/Ethnic Spiritual and Sexual Orientation Influence on Suicidal Behavior,” *The Oxford Handbook of Suicide and Self Injury*, ed. Matthew Nock. (Oxford University Press, 2014) .

<sup>9</sup> “Warning Signs of Suicide”, Accessed September 29, 2020. <https://save.org/about-suicide/warning-signs-risk-factors-protective-factors/>

## HISTORIC CHRISTIANITY

In the earliest centuries of Christianity, the issue of suicide was raised in light of persecution and martyrdom. Should a believer actively seek martyrdom during persecution to bring honor to Christ? Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, actively sought martyrdom and was even sent to Rome for this event. However, it was not fulfilled until about twenty-five years later (135 AD). Clement of Alexandria was critical of those who actively sought suicide as martyrdom. He saw it as a sin against God.

A second question was whether or not fleeing from death in the face of persecution was a treasonable act of a traitor to Christ? A positive answer would make this action a sin. There appears to be some exceptions in this view. Eusebius,<sup>10</sup> Jerome, and Chrysostom seem to be favorable toward the person, especially women who would commit an act of suicide (self-destruction) when pursued by those who intended to rob them of their faith or chastity. The account of Pelagia, her mother, and sisters plunging into a turbulent flowing river rather than be caught by their pursuers stands out as one example.

The conservative opinion saw suicide as “self-murder.” It was solidified in Augustine’s *City of God* and seems to have become the position of the Church for centuries.

It is significant that in Holy Scriptures no passage can be found enjoining or permitting suicide either in order to hasten our entry into immortality or to void or avoid temporal evils. God’s command “Thou shalt not kill” is to be taken as forbidding self-destruction.<sup>11</sup>

He further states: “Suicide is not a proper means to use in protecting one’s chastity. As long as the will remains unyielding, no crime beyond the victim’s power to prevent it without sin – does not compromise the virtue of chastity.”<sup>12</sup>

The actions of various Church councils reflect this opposition to suicide and negative actions following death through this manner.<sup>13</sup>

Council of Arles – repeated Roman legislation forfeiting the deceased estate (314 AD)

Council of Braga – no religious rites for suicides (561 AD)

Synod of Nimes – denied Christian burial. The corpse was desecrated by dragging it through the streets prior to burial (1572 AD).

In his major work, *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas Aquinas, (1224-1274) a Dominican monk, formulated the Roman Catholic Church’s position on suicide.<sup>14</sup>

1. It was unnatural.
2. Every man was a member of some community, so it was unsocial.

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<sup>10</sup> Eusebius, *The Ecclesiastical History*, Tr. J.E. L. Oulton (Cambridge: Harvard University Press)291.

<sup>11</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, (New York: Image Books,1958) 52.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>Norman L Farberro, ed. *Suicide in Different Cultures*, (Baltimore: University Park Press, 1975) 7.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 8

### 3. Life was a gift from God and was not at the disposal of man.

Consider one other example of opposition to suicide by public exposure of the deceased who committed suicide, “. . . during the 15<sup>th</sup> century city and church leaders in Geneva [Switzerland] would parade suicide corpses unclathed in the public square.”<sup>15</sup>

Many centuries later, theologian, Karl Barth (1886-1968) raised another setting in which suicide may be a consideration. The question was “whether a man may and should kill himself when there is danger that under torture he may betray his friends and cause, and thus directly or indirectly denied his faith.”<sup>16</sup> His conclusion was this individual can “have freedom to do this if God gives it. And he should then use it joyfully, resolutely, and with a good rather than a doubtful conscience.

## THREE SCENARIOS

1. A middle-aged lady is found in her garage asphyxiated from carbon monoxide. She was a faithful, dedicated believer working wherever needed in the local church. Her pastor, in a counseling session, advised her she needed professional help, not spiritual counseling. For years she had lived with a domineering, “mean” husband.

2. Within weeks of completing a four-month sabbatical this associate pastor of a large congregation and mental health advocate commits suicide with a handgun. How could one who understands the hurt and pain of suicide leave behind that burden on his family, friends, and fellow believers?

3. After completing the season with playing in eight games and starting four, this large university, freshman quarterback returns to the school planning to kill himself to bring awareness to the importance of mental health. On the chosen day his mother called to say “I love you”. This was just two minutes after his having said “God, if this isn’t your plan for me, please send me a sign.”<sup>17</sup>

Much more could be written in each of these narratives. Suffice it to say each one includes anxiety, pain, and depression which became a driving impulse.

## THOUGHTS FOR CONSIDERATION

1. The pages of historic Christianity are filled with opposition to the act of suicide. The sixth commandment, “Thou shalt not kill” (Ex. 20:13 KJV), was the major scriptural foundation for their opposition. But at the same time, as previously noted, there are

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<sup>15</sup>Johnson, “Preaching for Suicide Awareness: A Pedagogical Experiment in Teaching Preachers to Engage the Topic of Suicide”, 59.

<sup>16</sup>Karl Barth, Geoffrey William Bromily, and Thomas Torrance. *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of Creation*, Part 4 (vol.3: Edinburg: T&T Clark; 2004) 402-413.

<sup>17</sup>Chris Low, “Vol QB shares suicide struggles,” *Cleveland Daily Banner*, May 3, 2020, B3.

selected instances when taking one's own life was seen to be acceptable in view of dire circumstances.

2. Believers are not exempt from what has been labeled as “the darkness of the soul”. Overcome by physically and mentally depressing, haunting circumstances they find themselves resisting but still moving down the suicidal path.
3. What responsibility does the local church have in providing a community environment in which hurting individuals can feel security, love, and understanding while being tossed to and fro mentally and even physically? Feeling care by others helps to answer the question: “Why should I continue going on living?”.
4. Further consideration needs to be given to the area of accountability. Mental illness and mind-altering medication may erode or rob the ability to make a rational decision due to their free will being violated.
5. Regretfully, many believers are hesitant to obtain professional help for mental health issues. This is especially true for pastors. They are still regularly fired after the local church leadership “discover[s] they suffer from depression, bipolar disorder, or other mental health disorders.”<sup>18</sup>
6. We believe in the power of the Holy Spirit to comfort, deliver, and heal. That must never diminish as Pentecostals. At the same time, there are situations when individuals need a professional to help them work through their particular mental, emotional, and physical struggles.
7. Because of variable factors unknown to us, even though we do not approve of suicide, it seems our approach must be one of leaving this person in the hands of a gracious, just, all-knowing, loving Heavenly Father.

## FOR HELP WHEN CONSIDERING SUICIDE CALL

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

1.800.273.8255

Suicide Prevention and Mental Health Hotline

988

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<sup>18</sup>Lovett, “Churches Struggle With Mental Health.”

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care and counseling for Church of God credentialed ministers  
and their immediate families. For more information, visit  
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