

## Suicide and the Silence of Scripture

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### CT Classic: Suicide and the Silence of Scripture

*Though the church has come to opposing conclusions about the fate of victims, we have a mandate to minister to those left behind.*

By Thomas D. Kennedy | posted 7/6/00

Some years ago one of my better students came by my office for a chat. Several times before, she had talked of her troubled past. However, her faith had showed marked development.

But on this day she announced that she had recently planned for her suicide. I was shocked and confused.

Suicide is confusing for Christians. Although the general thrust of scripture is clearly opposed to the taking of one's own life, it provides no clear disapproval of the few cases of apparent suicide it recounts. Suicide also confuses us because some of those we believe to be strong in the faith have considered it as a "way out."

#### Samson and St. Augustine

Must we believe that those who have taken their own lives suffer the eternal punishment of God? Nothing in scripture drives us to that conclusion.

Of the seven or so suicides reported in Scripture, most familiar are Saul, Samson, and Judas. Saul apparently committed suicide to avoid dishonor and suffering at the hands of the Philistines. He is rewarded by the Israelites with a war hero's burial, there being no apparent disapproval of his suicide (1 Sam. 31:1-6). And while there is no hero's burial for Judas Iscariot (Matt. 27:5-7), Scripture

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is once more silent on the morality of this suicide of remorse.

The suicide of Samson has posed a greater problem for Christian theologians. Both Saint Augustine and Saint Thomas Aquinas wrestled with the case and concluded that Samson's suicide was justified as an act of obedience to a direct command of God.

Objections to suicide have a long history in the church. But the idea that suicide is an unforgivable sin is less easily traced. Among the church fathers, Saint Augustine was the most prominent and influential opponent of suicide. And early church synods declared that bequests from those who committed suicide (as well as the offering of those who attempted suicide) ought not to be accepted; and throughout the medieval period, proper Christian burial was refused those who committed suicide.

Saint Thomas Aquinas believed that suicide, by excluding a final repentance, was a mortal sin. Dante is likely to have influenced Christian thought at least as much as Saint Thomas, placing those who committed suicide in the seventh circle of the inferno. Luther and Calvin, despite their abhorrence of suicide do not suggest that it is an unpardonable sin. John Calvin is perhaps the most helpful on the issue, concluding that blaspheming against the Holy Spirit is the only unpardonable sin (Matt.12:31), and suicide need not be viewed as blasphemy. The pedigree of the view that suicide is unforgivable seems to lie in the medieval church and its distinction between mortal and venial sins.

## **Freely Chosen**

We must understand suicide as free and uncoerced actions engaged in for the purpose of bringing about one's own death. Once we define it this way, it is easy to grasp the church's clear teaching throughout the centuries that suicide is morally wrong and ought never to be considered by the Christian. Life is a gift from God. To

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take one's own life is to show insufficient gratitude. Our lives belong to God; we are but stewards. To end my own life is to usurp that the prerogative that is God's alone. Suicide, the church has taught, is ordinarily a rejection of the goodness of God, and it can never be right to reject God's goodness.

If we define suicide as consisting of only free and uncoerced actions, we must ask a series of questions as we try to understand any particular suicide: To what extent do we know the suicide in question was genuinely free? Could pain (either physical or emotional) have coerced the individual to do what he otherwise might not have done? But even if we could know that an act of suicide was genuinely free, can we know that the aim of the act was indeed one's own death rather than a misguided cry for help? Can we know that the suicide believed this action would really kill?

These questions lead us to withhold judgment in many cases; but more telling yet is this question: Did the individual aim at removing himself from God's goodness by suicide? Was this an act of suicide directly aimed at saying no to God? Or was it rather a tragically misguided attempt at saying yes to God? Eternal punishment is reserved, Christians believe, for those who directly reject God and reject God as a consistent pattern in life, not merely in a solitary final act. Every suicide is not a rejection of God's goodness. Indeed, in many cases suicide is mistakenly chosen to bring one nearer to God. We cannot say that such a motive for suicide is correct. Nor can we say that a person who makes this tragic mistake has removed herself forever from the grace of God.

**The Church's task**

When it comes to dealing with suicide, the church must do more than teach about it, for the church's primary task is to be the people of God.

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First of all, the church must commit itself to being a community of truth, a community in which believers tell the truth about their own lives. A church must hear the stories of pain, suffering, and failure in the lives of its members; and those who tell the stories must receive from the church both lamentation and the healing balm of Christ. When the church is open and honest about pain and suffering, it can then confront in love even the most difficult of human crises and failures--suicide.

Second, the church must commit itself to being a community of love, not quick to judge. Since suicide often brings with it the stigma of "unpardonable sin" and feelings of shame and guilt for the surviving family members, those currently free of pain must welcome those who suffer in the name of Christ; and with the aid of the Holy Spirit, they must place themselves at one another's disposal. A church might well have a team ministry to contact and inquire daily about those who are troubled. A church might also designate certain gifted individuals to whom one might turn in distress. A community of love bears patiently with those who contemplate suicide and those who grieve and feel guilty as a result of suicide.

Third, the church must commit itself to being a community of joy, a community in which the new life of Christ is celebrated, a community that calls others to celebrate in the new life of Christ. By living as a community of joy, by regularly celebrating God's goodness to us in Jesus Christ, the church ministers to those who are saddened, joyfully acquainting them with the One who has known their sorrows.

My student friend seems to be doing well these days. This is due in no small part to the fact that she worships in a church that has been a community of truth, a community of love, and a community of joy. I am not sure she is able to give a clear theological explanation of her troubles; but I do think she know that her life is worthwhile. And this, with the Holy Spirit's aid, will sustain her.

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*This article originally appeared in the March 20, 1987, issue of Christianity Today. At the time, Thomas D. Kennedy was visiting assistant professor of religion at Hope College in Holland, Michigan. He is now associate professor of philosophy at Valparaiso University in Valparaiso, Indiana.*