

*What is the proper Christian response to suicide? Can there be any hope of salvation for someone in the church who takes their own life?*

It is always a tragedy when a person takes his own life. Generally speaking, suicides die “having no hope, and without God in the world” (Eph. 2:12b), and the Bible takes a dim view of suicide. The only suicides in the Bible were obvious unbelievers and reprobates (Saul, Ahithophel, Zimri, and Judas Iscariot). In addition, the Heidelberg Catechism, in its treatment of the Sixth Commandment, warns, “that I hurt not myself, nor willfully expose myself to any danger” (Q&A 105). The very name *suicide* reveals its sinfulness. Literally, suicide is self-murder. We should therefore do everything in our power to avoid suicide, and to support a member of the church who shares with us that he is tempted to the sin of suicide. A suicidal person is in serious danger of destroying himself, and all suicidal ideation should be treated with the utmost seriousness. If a person confides suicidal thoughts with you, never dismiss these as a joke, but urge him to seek help immediately. Call a pastor, a medical professional, and do it without delay!

In a way, the question itself is not helpful. What we think of the salvation or otherwise of a suicide is not the issue. The issue, the urgent issue, is to *prevent* suicide, and, if it is too late for that, to *support* the devastated family and friends who are left behind after the tragic deed is done. Family members who are affected by a suicide of a loved one are often plagued by guilt or even depression themselves. Could I have done more to prevent this? Could I have seen the warning signs? Is it somehow my fault? Was I not supportive, loving, and caring enough? Why did he feel he had to leave us this way? Let such a person speak, and say little. Be a shoulder to cry on; weep with those who weep; be supportive in practical ways; and pray that God, the father of mercies, might comfort the bereaved (2 Cor. 1:3–4).

Suicide is a mental issue. A person who commits suicide is not in his right mind, because we are naturally inclined to self-preservation. A suicidal person, usually because of some great tragedy in his life, or because of the struggle with depression, feels that life is no longer worth living. Life has become meaningless, dark, painful, and suicide is a real temptation. The devil, who is a murderer, urges the despairing soul to suicide. At bottom suicide is an act of unbelief, an act of despair. This does not mean that all suicides are unbelievers. A believer can be and

often is guilty of unbelief. Unbelief, including suicidal thoughts and tendencies, and even suicide itself, is a sin, and all of us are prone to sin.

The question the reader asks is this: is suicide the unforgivable sin? Is the act of suicide a sin that God cannot or will not forgive? Does a Christian who dies at his own hand forfeit salvation, or is the act of suicide proof that the professing church member was never a child of God? These questions are not easy to answer. Neither Luther or Calvin, for example, dared go so far as to teach that all suicides perish everlastingly, although both Luther and Calvin recognized suicide as an abominable crime against God.

One argument made by some is that the suicide dies without opportunity for repentance. While this is true, it does not prove the case, and, indeed, proves too much. Consider the young person who, after an argument with his parents (a sin against the fifth commandment), is killed in a car accident. He did not have an opportunity to repent, and may have died harboring bitterness against his parents. Who would preach him into hell, especially if his rudeness was uncharacteristic of him, and in all other respects he was a good, confessing member of the church?

If the suicide was a confessing member of the church, and one of a generally godly character, but who struggled with depression, and tragically yielded to the temptation to self-murder, we do not give up hope concerning him. That does not mean that we condone suicide or in any way mitigate its seriousness, but we do not add extra sorrow to the family left behind. It does no one any good to speculate.

One final word: if anyone reading this feels tempted by suicide, seek help immediately. You are not alone. Your family, friends, and pastor will help you. Do not keep your suicidal thoughts to yourself. Suicide is a great sin, and with all sins we must resist the temptation. Suicide will bring dishonor upon the name of Christ; suicide will hurt your family and friends; suicide is a sin against faith, hope and love; suicide is a deeply selfish act. Suicide is never the answer. Seek comfort in the gospel of Christ, who gave his life for us, not in an act of suicide, but in an act of voluntary sacrifice, that we might have life and have it more abundantly.

What is the Christian response to suicide? One word: compassion.

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