

"Suicide"

Grove Presbyterian Church
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Several suicides are recorded in the Bible, though the word does not appear in the Bible, nor is it explicitly condemned:

Saul, his armor bearer, by sword -- I Sam 31: 4-5

Ahithophel, by hanging -- II Sam 17: 23

Zimri, by fire -- I Kings 16: 18

Samson, by destroying the building and himself - Judges 16: 30

Abimelech, commands armor-bearer to kill him instead of being taunted that a woman killed him - Judge 9:4

Judas, by hanging -- Mat 27: 5

Here's another: Acts 16: 25-29

A co-worker committed suicide. What happened to her?

One question, two questions. Cause and consequence.

What happened to her for her to choose suicide? Hard to tell.

What happened to her after her death? Harder to tell.

Bitter grief makes us worry: what does happen? One of the first questions several high school young people raised about the suicide of their teammate and school-mate was: "Where is her soul? Where is she now? Is she in heaven or not?"

Wise counselors guide self-discovery rather than try to answer that prickly one. How can you give a doctrinal answer when what is behind the question is pain and blame, anger and confusion?

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Different religions offer divergent views (and all of them are speculations based upon their distinctive theological presumptions of the nature of God):

Hinduism: since flesh is irrelevant, suicide is the result of unseemly karma, and you shall wander as a ghost until

the time you should have died

Buddhism: does not condemn, but raises concern about the reasons for this negative action

Muslim: suicide is strictly forbidden, it is a serious impediment to your spiritual journey, unpardonable. The Qu'ran describes that your punishment will take your suicide and make it eternal; if you stab yourself to death, you will eternally stab yourself in the Hell fire. Suicide bombers are not considered suicides but noble sacrifices for the cause.

Judaism: is it forbidden, a grave sin, for life is a gift from God. In the past suicides were buried on the outskirts of cemetery but that is no longer commonly practiced.

Roman Catholicism: it wasn't too long along suicides were denied burial in sacred ground. Similar to Judaism, suicide is as morally objectionable as murder, a rejection of God's sovereignty over life.

Overall, the Abrahamic religions have loosened up as to whether or not it is an unforgivable sin resulting in eternal punishment. Judaism, as with Christianity, follows less a doctrinal model and more a therapeutic model, asking: how can God punish and condemn those crying in pain? We focus on the sorrow of it, on the causes, because when it happens, regardless how it happens, it never is good.

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Emile Durkheim, in groundbreaking work, described two types of suicide: Egoistic Suicide (those with low social integration) and Altruistic Suicide (those with high social integration).

For there are different types of self-destruction: altruistically sacrificing yourself saving others (like the soldier who jumps on the hand grenade), euthanasia, protest suicide (as with immolating monks), defiance suicide (such as Hitler killing himself rather than being captured by the Russians), murder suicide, indirect suicide (such as joining the Army in hopes you will be killed or suicide by cop), and then there is the plain terrible choice to kill yourself to end the pain.

That it always is a choice is what we try to get across when a suicide happens. That the survivors cannot blame

themselves. The person made a choice. A very, very, very, very bad choice. Reviewing all the things you did with that person and all the things you didn't have a self-examining value - your growth as a human being and your spiritual development -- but you cannot beat yourself up for what they chose. Suicide always is tragic and pathetic. Suicide never is painless. And it is not always handled well.

Following the self-murder of Robin last December, a neighboring pastor mentioned to me that his youth director wanted to hold a candlelight vigil in her memory. Even though she didn't belong to his church, the youth director thought it would be a healing gesture.

Maybe it would have been a healing gesture for some, well intentioned, but it also was misguided. You don't do it. You may have a funeral service, but you stay away from glamorizing suicide.

For the same reason school districts disallow memorials in the memory of suicides. They also will remove those tokens and mementoes the kids will place on her locker. You can mourn the person, grieve the death, but you must avoid honoring the manner of the death. This is especially true with young people lest the sad, lonely, and desperate begin to think that this is how you get love, or attention. Glamorizing suicide puts others at risk.

What are the risk factors?

Depression

Anger

History of abuse

Drug or alcohol use

Previous attempts

Guns in the home

Social isolation

Crisis in sexual identity - tragically high rates of suicide among young homosexuals

Watch out especially when someone very agitated, exhibiting the risk factors, suddenly becomes very peaceful, even starts giving away possessions. They've made a decision. It is likely they've made a very bad decision.

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Recent scientific research indicates how the young are biologically susceptible. Which doesn't excuse stupid and reckless behavior, but it does help explain it.

Their frontal lobes are underdeveloped. Which is why 18 year olds make efficient soldiers. The 18 year old is much keener and readier to engage in high risk behavior. Unlike a 34 year old. The older you get the more cautious and circumspect you get: "Man, I'm not going to do that - that's dangerous, that's nuts."

Their younger brains simply are underdeveloped in the areas that control impulses or temper emotions. This gives them an inflated self-concept and a sense of invulnerability. They biologically lack the ability to connect the deed with the consequence.

We can see this kind of compartmentalized thinking, this lack of integrated thinking, in how our high school super-achiever, focused on grades, submits homework on time, is a school leader, active and competent from the band to sports to forensics - but back home the clothes cover the bedroom floor and she whines like a toddler. Different worlds.

Add to their under-developed frontal lobes a world rife with stresses, for our society is a pain machine:

The young think of love as a finite commodity - like petroleum - it has to be rationed because there's only so much available to distribute

The young suffer being pressured into premature adulthood. If you want to see young hookers, check out the Disney Channel.

The young suffer the social message that if you are not a winner you are a loser -such garbage

The young are preoccupied with the feeling of being observed, always on stage, self-conscious 24/7, as if wherever they go and whatever they do their parents are in folding chairs sitting on the sidelines watching and evaluating - hold it! We are! We think we are being supportive - what we are doing is invading their world.

When we were young our world may have been more stable and less structured - the opposite defines today: highly structured, very unstable

Unstable largely due to our permeable families today.

'Nuclear families' is past tense. Now our young spend less

time than ever with parents or relatives. Our families are subway families, bus-stop families. Spend a few minutes here, a few minutes there.

Add a dash of all the fear, violence, and rancor pouring out from congress to the streets, add a sprinkling of today's meanness, lack of civility and manners, back-breaking financial disappointments, cheap sex laden with shame, over-communication, and we have a cocktail for social isolation and anxiety.

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Cause and consequence. What happened to her involves us. Otherwise my friend wouldn't have felt the need to ask his question: a co-worker committed suicide, what happened to her.

As Christians we affirm we are linked:

None of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself
Romans 14: 7

We state clearly that self-murder is unequivocally unacceptable. It only spawns more victims because it is the ultimately selfish act. It leaves your family and friends, your teammates, even casual acquaintances - these survivors -- filled with guilt, blame, anger. You may think by suicide you escape, but they can't. All of which impedes healthy grief.

For no one ever hates his own body, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it,
just as Christ does for the church.
Eph 5: 29

We have a message to the wounded, lonely, and hurting:

First, there is nothing good about suicide. Self-murder robs the future. Robs potential. Those who kill themselves make a permanent choice on the basis of an impermanent cause, an unfixable action for fixable reasons. The sadness and evil of suicide is how it denies divine possibilities. You kill the chance for God to be redemptively active in your future. Suffering, however unfair, gives you a chance to witness to Christ. Our Lord shows us the path of suffering. He

didn't avoid it or try to escape it. The labor pains of suffering when coupled with faith give birth to a deeper courage and richer spirituality; I've never known anyone to become a better person when life was sweet and easy. Since when is your life your own anyway? We refute the false presumption that your life belongs to you. Your life belongs to God; it belongs to us too. Which is why we cherish you. What happens to you, involves me.

Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own?
I Cor 6:19

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All of which means this could be the church's opportune moment to be church. Who else will step up to heal, care for, welcome, encourage? Who else will offer the positives that the rest of society denies? Who else affirms a future? God, not the world, is our hope.

What best prevents suicide, whether contemplated by young or old?

A safe haven. A refuge from the stormy blast.  
A significant relationship with someone who sincerely cares  
A supportive network that erases the isolation  
A chance to express their emotions, their hurts, their worries, their pain - without judgment  
A place where they can honestly talk about suicide, because talking about it doesn't put it in someone's mind  
And absolution, forgiveness

So let us not grow weary in doing what is right,  
for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up.  
So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work  
--Galatians 6: 6-10

Such was the opportune moment between Paul and his jailer. Thank God Paul seized it. "Don't do it," he tells the guard. The guard is scared, frightened, worried. Dutiful Roman that he is, he feels trapped, caught in a corner, for he will be blamed and punished for what he falsely thinks is his failure. He will be blamed for their escape. He is about to commit a permanent act for a temporary problem.

"Don't do it!" is our message too. "Do not harm yourself!"  
we cry out from the darkness.

So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work...  
--Galatians 6: 6-10

Imagine if the jailor had fallen on his sword and killed  
himself. Never would he have then seen the miracle of the  
next hour:

When he discovers Paul and Silas haven't escaped even when  
they could have...

When he discovers Paul's concern for him, his future, his  
well-being -- Paul's concern and Christ's love. He never  
would have experienced this, had he...

When he cleanses the wounds of these unfairly beaten and  
imprisoned men. He never would have experienced this, had  
he...

When he hears the Word and his family receive the gift of  
baptism. He never would have experienced this, had he...

When he returns to his family with Paul and Silas as  
guests. Neither he nor his family would ever have  
experienced this, had he...

When he becomes a member of one of the loveliest and most  
joyous congregations in the Bible. He never would have  
experienced this, had he...

Because he didn't, because he paused and listened, he and  
his family experienced a whole new life.

Yes, it is true that where there is life there is hope; it  
is far truer that where there is hope there is life.

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