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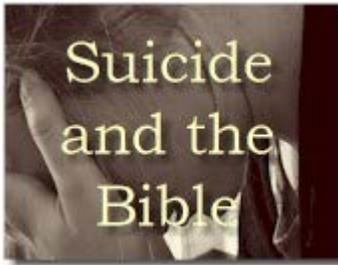
Suicide and the Bible

by Ernest L. Martin, Ph.D., 1981

Edited by David Sielaff, November 2018

First read the "[November 1, 2018 Commentary](#)"

Then read the "[November 2018 Newsletter](#)"



Editor's note: Dr. Martin wrote this 1981 Exposition on an important issue in America and around the world. The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2018*, says suicide is "the act or an instance of taking one's own life voluntarily and intentionally, especially by a person of years of discretion and of sound mind."

"Suicide" is derived from the Latin *sui*, one's self, and *caedere*, to kill. For the person attempting suicide emotions override the characteristic of a sound mind.¹ This article relates closely to a companion article "[Fear in Scripture](#)," dealing with two aspects of fear: (1) Victory Over Fear and (2) Fear Nothing but Fear Itself. DWS

The question of suicide has long been debated by students of the Bible. Is it a sin for one to take his or her life? Though suicide is not specifically condemned in any verses of the Bible, it is normally assumed by some preachers that it violates the command not to murder (Exodus 20:13; Romans 13:9). It ought to be pointed out that there is no general command in the Bible that one should never kill another human being. The essential teaching is that no one should kill someone illegally.

It was quite permissible in both the Old and New Testaments for people to be executed for certain crimes (Exodus 21:12–17; Romans 1:32; 13:1–4). This was also the case in wars that were commanded by God. Moses and Joshua in their conflict with the Canaanites reminded the Israelites of their obligation to exterminate the entirety of Canaanite peoples who resisted what they considered their divine right of conquest (Deuteronomy 2:34; Joshua 10:28–43). Even God often kills for various reasons (notably in cases of judgment upon a person or whole nations) and no one could possibly accuse Him of sin. This is also not murder, though it involves killing.

The reason we give these simple examples is to show that legal killing of human beings is allowed by biblical revelation. The problem, however (and it is a very serious question and often a complicated one), is what represents legal killing? In this article, we want to focus only on one aspect of the matter: the killing of one's self — suicide!

¹ "[Suicide](#)" in John McClintock and James Strong, *Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological and Ecclesiastical Literature* (NY: Harper & Brothers, 1895).

- Can suicide from a biblical point of view ever be considered legal?
- Could it ever be viewed as a righteous act and well within the wishes of God?
- Does it always have to be reckoned as a sin and utterly condemned?

These are questions that need answering, and I hope to put the matter into a proper, biblical perspective.

The problem of suicide has been more difficult to resolve for us in the Western World than in many other cultures of the past. Among the ancient Greeks (for example the teaching of the Greek philosopher Seneca), the right of suicide was actively defended as an expression of man's own personal freedom to choose for himself what he could do or not do with himself. There came to be a famous saying of the past, "**The door is open,**" which meant that any man or woman had the right "**at any time to choose to liberate himself from pain and evil**" (Adolf Wuttke, *Christian Ethics*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1873, vol. I, 139–140).

Even today in Japanese society it is recognized that suicide is an honorable way to show sincerity, and anyone has the right to kill himself as an act of love to himself and to other people that he or she does not want to afflict with the problem of his (or her) continued pain with life.²

In our Western World, suicide is sometimes acknowledged as honorable and highly esteemed. Suppose a husband places himself in front of a gunman who is ready to shoot his wife or children and allows himself to be killed to protect his loved ones? What about the military pilot who sees an enemy warship moving to destroy a city of his country and crashes his airplane with its load of bombs into that vessel to prevent its hostile action against his people? Though the pilot knew he was committing suicide, the love for his people and for his loved ones prompt him to give his own life so others might live. Such people are sometimes given Medals of Honor and are held in highest esteem.

In Scripture we have the example of Samson. God gave him the added strength to destroy the enemies of Israel (and at the same time he killed himself — he committed suicide) by performing his heroic deed. Read what Samson prayed for and did:

"Samson said ..., 'Suffer [Allow] me that I may feel the pillars whereupon the house stands, that I may lean upon them.' Now the house was full of men and women; and all the lords of the Philistines were there; and there were upon the roof about three thousand men and women, that beheld while Samson made sport. And Samson called unto YHWH, and said, 'O Lord YHWH, remember me, I pray you, and strengthen me, I pray you, only this once, O God, that I may be at once avenged of the Philistines for my two eyes.'

And Samson took hold of the two middle pillars upon which the house stood, and on which it was borne up ... And Samson said, 'Let me die with the Philistines.' And he bowed himself with all his might; and the house fell upon the lords, and upon all the people that were therein. So the dead which he slew at his death were more than they which he slew in his life."

• **Judges 16:26–30**

In Hebrews 11:32–33 the self-sacrifice or "suicide" of Samson was praised as an act of faith along with other heroes of faith.

Others did commit suicide: Saul and his armor-bearer (1 Samuel 31:4–5; 1 Chronicles 10:4–5), Ahithophel (2 Samuel 17:23), Zimri (1 Kings 16:18), and Judas (Matthew 27:5; Acts 1:18). The apostle Paul prevented the Philippian jailer from committing suicide in Acts 16:27.

The Example of Jesus Christ

Though it may seem odd to state it, Jesus Himself did commit a type of suicide! I realize that I am treading on thin ice, but it could be argued that the position of the New Testament regarding Christ's death on the tree of crucifixion, must be reckoned as taking one's own life for our sakes. "**As the Father knows me, even so**

² A comprehensive article on this subject is by A.J. Droge, "Suicide," ed. David Noel Freedman, *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, vol. 6 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 229–231.

know I the Father: and I lay down my life for the sheep” (John 10:15). Christ received great honor from God because He allowed Himself to be killed. He easily could have prolonged His life by calling twelve legions of angels to preserve it, but refused to do so, that He might fulfill Scripture (Matthew 26:53–54).³

Christ allowed His own life to be taken, with His own express permission, and God the Father loved Him for it. **“Therefore does my Father love me, because I lay down my life”** (John 10:17). In fact, the precise reason Jesus Christ came into this world was to die violently — as an act of lethal substitution for you, me, and the whole world (Isaiah chapter 53). There is no doubt that this is biblically true.

Jesus Christ was none other than **“the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world”** (Revelation 13:8). Christ did not say that He came into the world simply to let the Roman procurator Pilate kill Him. He did not come to earth simply to let Jewish people kill Him. He did not become a human simply to let any Gentiles kill Him. Christ came because He (and the Father) determined beforehand that He was to be killed through His own will! In effect, Christ Jesus committed the dictionary definition of suicide!

In one sense, Christ had Himself killed — the Romans, the Jews, or other Gentiles did not do it! **“I lay down my life for the sheep. ... Therefore does my Father love me, because I lay down my life”** (John 10:15, 17). He was just like Samson or the airplane pilot who gave up their own lives (in suicide) to preserve the lives of others. These types of “suicide” most people in the world honor.

What about Slow Suicide?

But what about other types? What if a person goes into the boxing ring or a football match knowing he could be greatly injured (or even die) in such sporting activities? Some are indeed killed. What about daredevil acts by some people — circus acts and the like? People often take death-defying risks all the time.

In fact, what about carrying around twenty, thirty, or eighty pounds of extra weight on your body? Could this be technically described as “slow suicide”? Doctors tell us being greatly overweight is deliberate “slow suicide.” It can lead to a “quick heart attack” and immediate death. The point is, just what is suicide? It is my belief that 90% of the population may well be committing “slow suicide” by the way they treat (actually, mistreat) their bodies.⁴ Most of these things, however, are often overlooked as examples of suicide. But why? There are scores of such things that all of us consciously do that contribute to the possibility of premature death, yet they are only mildly condemned by people in our Western (Christian) society. If one deliberately and decisively takes his or her life, some people consider it a sin of major proportions.

People can “eat themselves to death,” and that is considered okay. People can “worry themselves to death,” and that is okay. People perform sports that could easily cause their deaths, but that too seems okay. But to take one’s life with a gun, pills,⁵ or what have you, seems utterly condemned by most Christian preachers.

In no way are we condoning the act of taking one’s life in any way. What we feel is essential is that people begin to cope with the problems of life that cause a person to resort to giving the supreme sacrifice of his or her own life. That is easier said than done, but it is still the proper way to look at things.

³ Just before Jesus began His ministry, Satan tempted Jesus that He throw Himself from the Temple to test if God would preserve Him (Matthew 4:5–6; Luke 4:9–11). Jesus did not do so.

⁴ Remember, as believers our bodies are to be considered as Temples of God because God’s Spirit resides within us as God’s gift to us. Christ called His body a Temple, John 2:19–21:

“Jesus answered and said unto them, ‘Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.’ Then said the Jews, ‘Forty and six years was this temple in building, and will you rear it up in three days?’ But he spoke of the temple of his body.”

Too many of us neglect or damage our “temples.” The apostle Paul cautioned against doing so, 1 Corinthians 6:14–15, 19–20:

“And God has both raised up the Lord, and will also raise up us by his own power. Know you not that your bodies are the members of Christ? ... What? know you not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost [Spirit] which is in you, which you have of God, and you are not your own? For you are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God’s.

⁵ In our early 21st century, a new scourge of opioid addiction and abuse is causing many “unintentional” suicide deaths. DWS

How Is Suicide Considered Today?

Suicide is the quick taking of one's own life by a gun, pills, or jumping off a bridge, etc. There are normally two reasons people take this drastic action. One reason involves emotional problems dealing with such things as rejection, loneliness, lack of love from some person or persons, depression, feelings of inferiority, causing affliction to loved ones, friends, the community, etc. The other reason relates to physical difficulties such as great pain through sicknesses or persecution.

What must be realized is that these situations occur to most all people in varying degrees (1 Corinthians 10:13), but to some they happen more acutely. Some are driven to relieve the problems and pain by terminating their lives. When such situations begin to approach this intensity, we strongly recommend people obtain professional counseling from qualified people to bring them back to a sense of emotional balance. In many (probably most) cases, relief can be given to allow people to cope with these problems that can affect us all.

Salvation and Suicide

What if people succumb in moments of weakness and actually commit suicide? Is the salvation of those people at stake? Will such people be judged for such actions? The fact is, there is not one word in the Bible about a judgment from God in situations involving suicide. If anything, we have the statement of Christ: **“if you were blind, you should have no sin: but now you say, we see; therefore your sin remains”** (John 9:41). Christ meant to be “spiritually blind” — referring to people who are not recognizing the true and proper principles of God.

In suicide, almost all people are trying to relieve themselves (or others) of problems that seem to be making their lives miserable — even unbearable. What needs to be done, if at all possible, is to ask God for help in times of such desperation, and to get help from loved ones (or anyone) with encouragement and good professional care. Some do not seem to have the sense or the willpower to do this in times of intense crisis. Suicide is often the result.

Such affairs are normally very saddening to loved ones or friends who remain alive. Obviously, all potential suicide victims should be given as much help (within reason) that is possible to bestow on them a new hope for living. A real recognition that God, through Jesus Christ, truly loves them — and that they have other loved ones around, as well as friends, etc., — is what everyone needs. Despite the terribleness of the act, suicide of itself should not be looked on as the most heinous sin of the Bible. Actually, there is not a verse in the Bible that calls it a sin. This does not mean it recommends it. If anything, the suicides of Haman, Saul, Ahithophel, and Judas were not described as good. Yet none of them was utterly condemned. And remember, the suicide of Samson included him as one of the heroes of faith (Hebrews 11:32).

One thing for certain, suicide will not keep a person from salvation. There is not the slightest doubt that in the fullness of the dispensation of times (Ephesians 1:10), all individuals who ever lived will obtain a oneness (a complete salvation) in Christ (Colossians 1:15–21; Philippians 2:10–11; 1 Timothy 2:4–6). Jesus said that He came into the world to save the world, not to destroy it or even a part of it (John 3:16–17).

“And this is the Father's will which has sent me, that of all which he has given me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up again at the last day.”

• *John 6:39*

Though suicide is a personal tragedy — not only to the person who terminates his life but to loved ones who remain alive — and it should be avoided through every effort possible, it certainly will not keep one from the ultimate salvation which Jesus Christ has secured for the entirety of the human race. We ought to be thankful for the death that Christ deliberately underwent so that we may all have an eternal life in happiness and joy. **“I have come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly”** (John 10:10).

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