

SUICIDE

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It was early in the morning that I was awakened by the telephone. Chester¹ had shot himself. Whether or not he was dead, was not stated. I rushed to his home where paramedics confirmed the tragedy - Chester had taken his own life.

Another man named William¹ had professed faith in Jesus Christ only a short time before he took his own life. Apparently embarrassed by his own misconduct, he placed his head inside a gas oven and turned on the jets.

Plagued throughout his life with manifold difficulties, Ned¹ brought his own life to an end with a bottle of tablets and a quantity of beverage alcohol.

The word suicide comes to our English language through French from the Latin *suicidium*; *se* and *coedo*, "to slay." It translates as "self-murder; the act of designedly destroying one's own life." Blackstone, the jurist, wrote, "To constitute suicide, the person must be of years of discretion and of sound mind."² With the spate of "temporary insanity" claims today, the definition by Blackstone would be forced to fall upon deaf ears; nevertheless, the basic definition, "to slay self," remains.

With Biblical history spanning nearly 6,000 years, one might expect instances of suicide to literally abound. To the contrary, however, only six instances of suicide are mentioned in Scripture: Samson (Judges 16), Saul (I Samuel 31), Saul's armor-bearer (I Samuel 31), Ahithophel (II Samuel 17), Zimri (I Kings 16), and Judas Iscariot (Matthew 27 & Acts 1). Additional mention of suicide is offered in Scripture, but the six listed persons constitute the only instances of committed acts.

Samson's sins delivered him into the hands of the Philistines. They had taunted him, gouged out his eyes and compelled him to grind, like an animal, at the mill. A careful reading of the account bears out that Samson's will for vengeance was more a vindication of the LORD God's Name than of his dire circumstances. He prayed that the Lord would allow him strength enough to bring down his enemies even at the cost of his own life. The Lord allowed it; and the Scriptures say more died through Samson's suicide than through all his previous warfares against his enemies.

So the dead whom he killed at his death were more than those whom he killed in his life (Judges 16:30c).

Samson's suicide--and with the Lord's permission--could hardly be thought so heinous as to erase from him God's eternal life. Nothing in the passage or in the whole of Scripture suggests this. or could we expect a suicide, were it an erasure of eternal life, to be found listed in the Roll Call of the Faithful. Yet, Samson is listed among the faithful (Hebrews 11:32).

The case of Saul is a bit more difficult to explain. Having begun with such promise (I Samuel 9:2; 10:9; 11:6), Saul degenerated in the sight of God and of Israel over whom God had placed him as king (I Samuel 13:9; 15:9, 35). Probably, we should understand Israel as viewing both good and evil as from God. So when "an evil spirit from the Lord terrorized" Saul (I Samuel 16:14), it was, to the Hebrew mind, the willful work of God Himself. We must, of course, be careful not to view God in any way compliant with evil. His hatred of sin sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to the Cross! His sovereign control over all things simply allows that He is superior over evil as well. As Satan could not move against Job without God's allowance, so all evil is subject to His allowance. Yet, while Saul is King over Israel, he is under God's overall protective custody. And there is no

Scripture to suggest that while, having once embraced Israel's God as his own, Saul was ever viewed as separated from God for eternity.

In any event, Saul had sinned by allowing witchcraft to dwell in Israel --an allowance God could not abide. In his desperation, Saul had consulted with the Witch of Endor. Both were surprised when the real Samuel arose to speak and prophesy that Saul and his sons would be shortly slain in battle.

"As you did not obey the Lord and did not execute His fierce wrath on Amalek...therefore tomorrow you and your sons will be with me..." (I Samuel 28:18-10).

Having been severely wounded in battle and striving to avoid the disgrace and quench his fear of Samuel's prophecy-fulfillment, Saul ultimately took his own life.

Jewish tradition claims Saul's armor-bearer to have been Doeg, the Edomite. Doeg overheard Ahimelech tell David of the sword of Goliath. Doeg's revelation of this to Saul resulted in the death of the priests at Saul's hand (I Samuel 21:7-8; 22:21-22). It would follow that any armor-bearer to the king would be emotionally close to the king as well. Understandably then, Doeg refused to slay Saul even when commanded to do so. And equally understandably, Doeg took his own life when he saw that Saul his king was dead.

The instance concerning the suicide of Ahithophel is more interesting still. Ahithophel was, by profession, an outstanding counselor, who had served King David. The Scriptures appear to inform us that Ahithophel was the grandfather of Bathsheba. Whether his disdain toward David because ofn David's affair with Bathsheba served as his provocation, we do not know; but Ahithophel became counselor to David's son, Absalom, during the time when Absalom sought to wrest the throne from his father. And it was Ahithophel who suggested that Absalom consort with David's concubines in the presence of Israel, thus

denoting David's abdication of the throne to the usurpatious Absalom.

Learning that Ahithophel had sided with Absalom in the revolt, David sent Hushai into Absalom's camp under pretense of siding with the ambitious Absalom. When counsel was sought, Ahithophel, of course, gave his counsel. Absalom noted that Hushai was also present and called upon him to give counsel as well. Hushai pretended to have agreed with Ahithophel's previous counsel, but discounted his present counsel. Tense moments hung in time while Absalom considered the matter; then he announced his agreement with the counsel of Hushai.

When Ahithophel learned that his counsel had been rejected, he went home, put his domestic and business affairs in order and hanged himself.

The Scriptures are silent regarding Ahithophel's placement in the afterlife. Whether he was under the blood atonement of the Old Covenant, we cannot be certain. He well may have been, and perhaps being blinded by his bias against the king, was caught up in the opportunity for sweet revenge. For us, the best counsel in interpretation is: where the Scriptures are silent, be also silent. It would be as wrong for us without the presence of hard evidence to assign anyone to Heaven as it would be to assign them to Hell. Eternal assignments are God's prerogative.

The situation with Zimri is quite a different matter. Zimri was a military officer under Elah, King of Israel. Aspiring himself to be king, he conspired against Elah and murdered him. The reign of Zimri was splattered with the blood of his victims. Despite the fact that many of his victims received at Zimri's hand judgment from God, God held him responsible and accountable for his activities. He had not murdered people at God's direction.

As with most conspirators, Zimri was a coward. When he saw circumstances turn against him, he went into the king's house, set it on fire and allowed it to burn down around him. Thus, in that manner, he took his own life. Once again, as the Scriptures are silent concerning Zimri's eternal whereabouts, we must be cautious in making hard evaluations. It would not surprise me, however, to learn someday that Zimri went to Hell; for nothing in his life demonstrated any love for or allegiance to Almighty God. He was out-and-out for what he could get for himself.

In the final Scriptural notation of suicide, Judas Iscariot hanged himself after awakening to the fact that he had betrayed innocent blood. Doubtlessly, the refusal of the Temple priests to receive back from him the blood-money they had paid him for betraying Jesus into Pilate's hands, bore heavily upon his conscience; nevertheless, actual guilt produced actual guilt feelings regarding the gravity of what he had done. So severe was this guilt, that the only way out seemed the termination of his life.

Only in the instance of Judas Iscariot do we know with certainty that he descended into Hell. Acts 1:18 assures us that Judas "went to his own place." While this phrase might give rise to honest debate, it does appear to stand in bold relief against the phrase "in My Father's house" of which Jesus spoke with reference to believers.

The concept of some that those who commit suicide automatically enter into eternal separation from God is completely foreign to the Scriptures. This concept originated with the Roman Catholic Church and has no foundation whatsoever in the Word of God.

Nevertheless, suicide is wrong for several reasons: first, suicide presumes to know what is reserved only for the Creator. God alone is the fountain of life. Since

He gives life, it is logically and theologically His prerogative to take life.

God has allowed sin to demonstrate some temporary jurisdiction over life through sin's promotion of death. Death (qanatoj), however, is not the cessation of life; it is only the termination of life as we know it. Having been created "in the image of God," man possesses an eternal quality to his life. That quality of life in man provides that man continues to live throughout eternity whether with God in eternal glory or apart from God in eternal damnation.

When the Apostle John speaks of the "sin unto death" (I John 5:16-17), he addresses the status of the believer whose life is displeasing to God. John notes that God is able to take away the earthly life from those whose lives so embarrass God and hinder His work that His cause is better off without them. Such again is the prerogative of the Creator. Thus, when any man stretches forth his hand against himself, he presumes to take the place of the Creator and thereby violates the right of God.

Second, the one who suicides presumes to do the work of the Creator in that he assumes his own assessment of whether he should live is superior to that of God. And even if it were possible for him to be correct in such an assessment, he further presumes against God in his timing.

Third, suicide is murder except that it is carried out against one's own person instead of against another. Does the victim make a difference in the crime? Certainly not. Simply because no punishment can be meted out against a suicide in no way exonerates the offender of his crime. Crime is a sin; and all sin is against God.³

Finally, if our interpretation of Jesus' tears at the grave of Lazarus (John 11) be correct in that Jesus

was weeping over the reality of sin and sin's destruction of God-given life, then suicide -especially a believer- must bring grief to the heart of the Savior.

We must conclude, therefore, that suicide is always wrong. Yet, as there is nothing that man can do to undo the sovereign works of God, the true believer who discovers himself momentarily enmeshed in the anxieties or depressions that come from human circumstances, and thus takes his own life, nevertheless remains a believer eternally secure in Christ because he has previously been born again. To hold any lesser view would be to diminish the finished work of Christ on Calvary - a supreme work that must take precedent over all others, especially the works of man.

1A true instance, but not his real name

2American Dictionary of the English Language, Webster, 1828

3Note Psalm 51.