

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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Tests of God's Grace: Suicide and the Death of a Child

Suicide: In the early days of December in 1983, I received a call in my office from my father in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. He shared with me the tragedy of my 23-year-old brother's suicide. My brother knew Jesus as His Savior, but struggled much of his life with severe depression. At the low point in one of those cycles of depression, he took his life. As a family, we asked the typical questions: "Why? What could we have done to prevent this? Why did we not see the signs? Why did we miss them?" Guilt, questioning, doubt in God's goodness and grace naturally followed. These were some of the most difficult days of my life. But those days drove me to a deeper exploration of God's goodness and His grace.

Based on the teachings of Augustine and other early Church Fathers, the Roman Catholic Church has condemned suicide on the grounds that it is self-murder; that it precludes any opportunity for repentance; and that it is a cowardly act. In the 13th century, Aquinas condemned it as contrary to natural law and to a proper self-love. Further, the church has taught that the immorality of suicide could lead to the eternal rejection by God. Although this is no longer practiced, for centuries the Church commonly refused burial in official cemeteries to a suicide victim. Typical evangelical Protestants reject the idea that suicide affects a person's eternal destiny, but still struggle with how to view it theologically and how to counsel families that experience such a tragedy.

About 10% of American adults suffer from depression and more than 38,000 die by suicide each year. Some who commit suicide are Christians. As we think about such statistics, two truths are important: **[1]** We live in a fallen, broken world where depression is real and just as serious as heart disease and cancer: Indeed, disease, sickness and pain are all rooted in a world broken by sin. **[2]** We also teach Christians the innate value and worth of human life, yet some Christians choose to take their own life. Is such an act a mortal sin which God cannot forgive? Is suicide an unforgivable sin?

Several germane thoughts: First, it is imperative to urge Christians not to link mental illness (e.g., severe depression) with spiritual weakness. Second, the church of Jesus Christ cannot be silent on the reality of clinical depression and the possibility of resultant suicide. The church must be a place of refuge and strength for those who have such struggles and for those who experience a suicide in their family. Third, faith in Jesus Christ is the clear New Testament requirement for salvation. If a person accepts Christ as Savior, but struggles with clinical depression or some other mental illness, which could lead to suicide, there is nothing in the Bible which would produce the conclusion that God's grace is not sufficient to cover that sin of

suicide. Instead, the Bible proclaims that God understands our weakness, our brokenness, and our sin. If someone who commits suicide has appropriated Christ's finished work to their life by faith, I see nothing in Scripture declaring that God withdraws His grace because of the suicidal act.

The Death of a Child: There is nothing more devastating than a miscarriage, the death of a newborn, or the tragedy of an infant death. Over the years of my academic and church ministry, I have been frequently asked, "What happened to my child who died so young? Is my child with Jesus?" Part of the challenge in responding is that the Scriptures give us no direct answer. To provide an answer to such heart-wrenching questions, let's review the character of God, the finished work of Jesus and the condition of lost humanity. Many expositors and theologians have attempted to provide the needed framework for giving comfort to grieving parents and family members, but none is more helpful than John MacArthur. He provides four biblical truths:

- All children are conceived and born as sinners. Every human being inherits the guilt and corruption of Adam. When Adam sinned all humanity sinned (Romans 5:1-19; especially v. 12). Even King David affirms that he was "brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me" (Psalm 51:5). Sin is not only what we do; it is what we are!
- The salvation of humanity is a matter of God's grace, not human works. The salvation of every person is initiated by God and is His sovereign choice, through grace, based upon no merit whatsoever in the individual sinner. MacArthur argues that "Salvation is all by grace. There is no clearer manifestation of this truth than the gift of eternal life to a helpless, lost infant. The saving grace given to an infant who has no part whatsoever in his salvation is a perfect example of salvation, which is always wrought sovereignly by God through grace."
- Salvation is through the sacrificial work of Jesus Christ on the cross—the supreme manifestation of God's grace. Infants have no merit by which anyone could ever claim they deserve heaven, but the infant's salvation is paid for by the substitutionary sacrifice of Christ on the cross.
- Scripture teaches that salvation is by grace, but judgment and damnation are by works. Willful, rebellious sin is the basis for God's judgment. This is clear in the passage describing the Great White Throne judgment (Revelation 20:11-15): Eternal condemnation is connected with willful sin. But,
 1. Little children have no willful rebellion or unbelief.
 2. Little children are incapable of suppressing the truth about God as Paul details in Romans 1:18. God's clear revelation to lost humanity is through His creation, through conscience and through His moral law (see Romans 1:18—3:20). Small infants are simply incapable of understanding, let alone suppressing such revelation.

3. Little children cannot understand sin's impact or its consequences. Young children disobey, but children have "no understanding that rebellion, lying, stealing [etc.] are in violation of God's law and that such actions have any form of eternal consequence. Young children are incapable of understanding God in this way."
4. Little children have no ability to choose salvation. The Bible is crystal clear that the human being must appropriate by faith the finished work of Jesus Christ. An infant cannot possibly make such a conscious, willful decision of faith. Free moral agency does not characterize infant children.

MacArthur concludes that, "In no place does Scripture teach infant damnation. Rather, every biblical reference—whether oblique or direct—to the issue of infants and children who die gives us reason to believe they go immediately into the eternal presence of God."

God reveals Himself throughout Scripture as a God of grace. Indeed, Scripture speaks of God's common grace (toward all humanity), His saving grace in salvation (justification), and His sustaining grace in sanctification. The epitome of His grace is of course the cross and that grace covers the heart-wrenching questions associated with the suicide of a believer and the death of an infant. Let us praise our God of grace!

See Amy Simpson, "Addressing Depression and Suicide in your Church," www.buildingchurchleaders.com (18 April 2013); John MacArthur, *Safe in the Arms of God: Truth from Heaven about the Death of a Child*; and Robert P. Lightner, *Heaven for Those Who Can't Believe*.