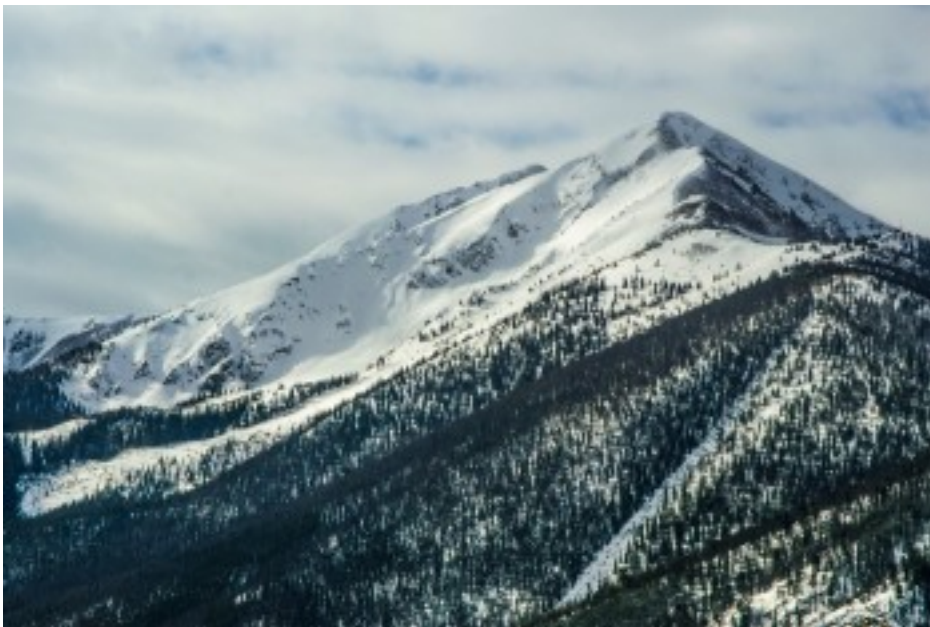


Is Suicide the Unpardonable Sin?

The evangelical community was rocked and deeply saddened in 2013 when news broke of the tragic death of Rick Warren's 27-year-old son, Matthew. Perhaps never before, at least in the Christian community, has a death caused such emotional turmoil and energetic concern to learn what the Bible teaches about suicide.

In the wake of that event I was asked by numerous people: Is suicide the unpardonable sin?



What Is Suicide?

In order for an act to be suicide, one need not die directly by one's own hand. A person might persuade another to do the killing, but this would still be suicide. I have in mind a person who wishes to die but wants to preserve life-insurance benefits for his family (which are forfeited if he dies by his "own hand"). Thus it would seem that just as one can commit murder through the agency of another, so also one can commit suicide through the agency of another.

It is also possible to distinguish between passive and active suicide.

Consider this case from Robert Wennberg's [*Terminal Choices: Euthanasia, Suicide, and the Right to Die*](#) (while not agreeing with everything he wrote,

I've been greatly helped by Wennberg's book):

A woman who is in a state of depression is accidentally given a drink containing a lethal dose of poison. Unaware of its contents, she consumes the drink. Upon being informed of what has happened, she is provided with a safe and effective antidote—but she refuses to take the antidote and subsequently dies. If we assume that she refused the antidote because she wanted to die, I think we would conclude that she committed suicide. Thus we seem justified in concluding that suicide can be carried out passively as well as actively.

Most people think that a death by “natural causes” cannot be a suicide. But what about the diabetic in despair who, although in otherwise good health, stops taking his insulin in order to end his life? He soon lapses into a diabetic coma and dies before being discovered. Clearly, he died of natural causes, yet just as clearly he committed suicide.

The most basic definition of a suicide is when one intends to die, or when one acts on the desire to die. This person pursues a course of action for the express purpose of ending his or her life. Thus, for example, the soldier who charges the enemy in a time of war, knowing that he most likely will die, is not guilty of committing suicide. As Wennberg puts it, he is not choosing this act as a means to his death “but rather is accepting a foreseen yet unwelcome consequence of what he is doing” (23). In a sense, then, the soldier is engaging in a suicidal act but is not committing suicide, because he is not undertaking his mission for the express purpose of ending his life.

Is Suicide Murder?

Although we don't instinctively think of murder in this way, to unlawfully take one's own life would not differ morally from taking another's life.

The Bible only records six incidents where a person takes his own life. In none of these is an explicit moral evaluation or judgment rendered: the case

of Abimelech in [Judges 9:50-57](#); Samson in [Judges 16:28-30](#) (although some are not convinced this is suicide in the strict sense of the term); Saul and his armor-bearer in [1 Samuel 31:1-6](#) ([2 Sam. 1:1-15](#); [1 Chron. 10:1-13](#)); Ahithophel in [2 Samuel 17:23](#); Zimri in [1 Kings 16:18-19](#); and Judas Iscariot in [Matthew 27:5](#).

It is worth noting that in each of these cases the suicide is the end to a life that did not (at least in its latter stages) meet with God's approval.

Is Suicide the Unpardonable Sin?

People often answer “yes” to this question because suicide leaves no room for repentance; a person enters eternity with unconfessed and therefore unforgiven sin. But nowhere does the Bible say that suicide is an unforgiveable or unpardonable sin. Furthermore, the Bible teaches that all sin—past, present, and future—is forgiven through faith in the atoning death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. One’s eternal destiny is sealed and set at the moment of justifying faith. Our depth of intimacy, fellowship, and joy is certainly affected adversely when we fail to confess and repent of daily sin. But our eternal destiny has already and forever been determined. We must recognize the distinction between eternal forgiveness that is ours the moment we embrace Jesus in faith, and that temporal forgiveness we receive on a daily basis that enables us to experience the happiness of intimacy with the Father.

Finally, numerous instances of sudden death may bring a Christian into eternity before he or she had opportunity to confess and repent. As Wennberg puts it, “What about the heart-attack victim who dies while brutalizing his wife or in the midst of an adulterous liaison? Does his failure to repent in this life forever remove the possibility of forgiveness in the next? And must we never pass from this life with unconfessed and unrepented sin lest we never find forgiveness and reconciliation with God in the next?” (55). Common sense reveals that many, if not most, of us will die with sins of

which we have not repented.

Is suicide ever morally permissible? What moral judgment do we make in the case of the soldier who falls on a live grenade to save the life of his friend; or when the destitute mother stops eating what little food remains in order that her child may live; or when the POW swallows a cyanide capsule, knowing that otherwise he will be brainwashed and tortured into divulging crucial information that will be used to the detriment and perhaps death of his countrymen? What moral judgment do we make in the case of a soldier trapped in a burning tank from which there is no hope of escape? Is it morally permissible for him to end his life with a gunshot to the head rather than to die in agony in that fiery inferno?

Common sense reveals that many, if not most, of us will die with sins of which we have not repented.

What about the Christian in the third century who is given a choice: either deny Jesus or be thrown to the lions? By refusing to deny Jesus, the believer chooses a course of action that she knows will result in her death (even though it is not her conscious intent to die). But that would not be suicide insofar as the death she desired was an unintended side effect of her fidelity to Christ. What if this same lady killed herself in order to avoid rape or slavery (not an uncommon occurrence in the early church)? It seems then she would be guilty of suicide because her death would have been the intended means of avoiding the pain and humiliation of slavery and/or rape.

A similar case would be a person with a terminal illness who chooses to take large doses of morphine necessary to control the pain. However, such morphine also accelerates the process of dying, something the patient welcomes. But if such treatment is chosen to diminish pain and not to accelerate death, the latter is an unintended side effect even though it is a

desired side effect. This person would not be guilty of committing suicide. Or would he/she?

What about cases of terminal illness when someone declines treatment that will prolong an already painful life? Such a decision was likely not motivated by the desire to die sooner but by the desire to die less painfully. Thus, is it suicide when one seeks to shorten one's life merely by refusing to retard the progress of an inescapable dying condition?

These are obviously difficult and challenging questions that the Bible simply does not directly address. But this one thing is certain: Although suicide is most assuredly a serious sin that violates God's expressed will concerning the sanctity of life, there is no evidence to conclude that it is a sin beyond the reach of the forgiveness obtained for us at the cross of Christ. In other words: no, suicide is not the unpardonable sin.

Editors' note: This excerpt is adapted from Sam Storms' new book, [*Tough Topics 2: Biblical Answers to 25 Challenging Questions*](#) (Christian Focus, 2015).