

# How Does God View Suicide?

By *Becky Wang Cheng*

Obviously the answer to the question in the title is “I don’t know,” but neither does anyone else. The Bible is silent on the subject, but this is a question I’ve pondered increasingly in my medical practice.

The first time I wrestled with the question was in my late twenties. I will never forget how the joy of being a young wife and mother, walking my two-year-old son to Sabbath School on a sunny February morning, suddenly turned into horror, shock, and guilt when the teacher stepped out to tell me that Sharon (not her real name), my medical school classmate, roommate, and maid of honor, had been found dead from an overdose the night before. Crazy people take their lives, but not bright young women who love God and are my friends!

Sharon had visited me just before Christmas. I could still see her throwing back her head, her brown hair flying, all of us laughing as we shared memories of medical school, and now she was gone forever? Why didn’t she call me? Why now—a year away from starting her career? I studied her picture—in which

she held my second son and grinned at the camera—searching for clues...that still aren’t there.

Sharon probably suffered from clinical depression, but to this day I don’t know if she ever got professional help. Among people in general, but especially Christians, mental illness carries such a stigma of shame. We were best friends, so I knew she felt bad about being single, and she was never sure she could please her parents or even live up to her own internal, unreachable standards.

Her death provoked a host of unanswerable questions. What was God thinking when he watched Sharon, bone tired and alone in her apartment after a long day during which a male surgeon had apparently yelled at her? What was Sharon thinking when she swallowed a handful of antidepressant pills before



laying down to sleep and never awaken?

Suicide engenders questions asked one after another, which have been pondered since antiquity without satisfactory or comforting resolution. The sixth commandment is often used as a prohibition against suicide, but is suicide truly self-murder or an often-irrational, impulsive act of despair? If God can forgive the most heinous crimes of murder, why should suicide be unforgivable?

Does God's grace end at death? What role does motive play in determining God's view? If the person sincerely considers an act of self-sacrifice—"if I'm out of the picture, my children won't have to see me slowly die from this degenerative disease"—does God view the death with compassion rather than condemnation?

How important are genetics in predisposition to suicide—the visiting of the sins (genes?) of the fathers upon the children for generations (Exod. 20:5)? Just last week, I saw a patient whose father had hanged himself at age eighty, whose forty-year-old brother had jumped into Niagara Falls, whose younger brother had shot himself in his thirties. Is she "predestined" to be suicidal, at worst, or depressed, at best? If suicide is the end result of a long mental illness, such as paranoid schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, or major recurrent depression, is it any different from death from heart disease or cancer?

The Bible includes only three recorded suicides, all of which involved betrayal. Judas hanging himself is the most famous, and the only New Testament example. Two lesser known suicides are Saul in his last battle, and Ahithophel, David's adviser, who joined forces with Absalom. Although suicide is not explicitly forbidden in Scripture, Karl Barth points to these as examples of "those who refuse God's grace and try to exist as their own lords and masters," thus echoing St. Augustine's resounding condemnation of suicide.<sup>1</sup>

In a very intriguing, profoundly comforting statement, Barth goes on to suggest that in some cases suicide might be a response to faith in God!



Who can say that it is absolutely impossible for the *gracious God Himself to help a man in affliction by telling him to take this way out?* In some cases, perhaps a man can and must choose and do this in the freedom given him by God and not therefore in false sovereignty, in despair at the futility of his existence, or in final, supreme and masterful self-assertion, but in obedience.<sup>2</sup> (emphasis supplied)

Dietrich Bonhoeffer asserts that suicide is wrong because it stems from "a sin of lack of faith," but he also concedes that God is the ultimate judge. "But who would venture to say that God's grace and mercy cannot embrace and sustain even a man's failure to resist this hardest of all temptations?"<sup>3</sup>

For the thief on the cross, the last moments of life determined his destiny for eternity. Here is where I find God's view of humans in our time of extremity. Jesus looked at him with full forgiveness and acceptance, and his words of hope were the last words the man heard (Luke 23:42, 43).

So Albert, Mary, Harold, Bernie, Win, Rita, Judy, Yvonne, and other grieving ones, I believe God was present with your loved ones as he was with Sharon in her apartment that cold Michigan night, loving, forgiving, and whispering words of comfort to her as she took her last breath.

## Notes and References

1. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1957-69), 4.4: 409.
2. *Ibid.*, 411.
3. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, ed. Eberhard Bethge, trans. Neville Horton Smith (New York: Macmillan, 1955): 168, 172.

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