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Is Suicide the *Sin* Unforgivable

We pray for your mercy for those who have killed themselves. We know not their fears, and we thus fear they died alone. They are now yours: in that is our comfort. Comfort all who love them and who will miss their presence.

STANLEY HAUERWAS, PRAYER ON THE OCCASION OF
THE SUICIDE OF A DIVINITY SCHOOL STUDENT

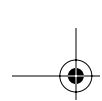


When Diane was six years old, her teenage brother killed himself while away at college. She came home one day to find her father sobbing, having just learned of the death from university representatives. "I knew that cats died and that dogs died, but I didn't think that people died," she remembers. "My family just imploded." Her mother was devastated, and her father sat alone in dark rooms at night crying.

But at first nobody told Diane that her brother had killed himself. Not her family, nor her friends or neighbors. A few months later a neighbor finally explained that the death had been a suicide.

Several years later, when she was about ten, Diane saw a program about life after death. It mentioned that Catholics believe suicides go to hell. Diane was growing up in a Catholic neighborhood, and she now realized why her Catholic friends and neighbors had avoided the subject of her brother's suicide.





“Nobody wanted to tell me because they didn’t think I was big enough to handle it,” she says. They didn’t want her to think about her brother’s eternal destiny. After watching the TV program she concluded, *That’s what must have happened. He went to hell because he killed himself.* This became a concrete reality to her, and throughout the rest of her growing-up years Diane imagined morbid pictures of her brother in hell.

Images from popular culture reinforce such suspicions. In the movie *What Dreams May Come* a grief-stricken character blames herself for her family’s accidental deaths and kills herself in an act of survivor’s guilt. A family member in heaven awaits her arrival, only to be told, “She was a suicide. Suicides go to another place.” According to the heavenly guide, because suicide violates the natural, God-given order for life, suicides go to hell.

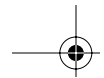
Those of us grieving a suicide are already in pain because our loved one is no longer with us. Then we are further tormented with the possibility that she or he is suffering in hell. We are haunted by terrible questions: What if we will never see our loved ones again? What if they are lost forever? Is suicide the unforgivable sin? Do suicides automatically go to hell?

The Morality of Suicide and the Problem of Forgiveness

Most major world religions have long considered suicide an immoral act. In Islam, suicide warranted eternal damnation. “Muhammad proclaimed that a person who commits suicide will be denied Paradise and will spend his time in Hell repeating the deed by which he has ended his life.”¹ In Judaism, a rabbinic text states, “He who destroys himself consciously (*la-daat*), we do not engage ourselves with his funeral in any way. We do not tear the garments and we do not bare the shoulder in mourning and we do not say eulogies for him.”²

Christianity’s stance against suicide can be traced back to the influence of the theologian Augustine. In the fifth century, he declared that suicide was never justifiable, even for those who killed them-





selves to avoid being raped during the sack of Rome. Suicide, for Augustine, was self-murder and thus a violation of the sixth commandment. “Certainly he who kills himself is a homicide,” wrote Augustine.³

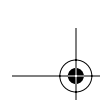
By the sixth and seventh centuries the church had officially codified its opposition to suicide. Thirteenth-century theologian Thomas Aquinas wrote, “Suicide is always a mortal sin, as being contrary to the moral law and to charity.”⁴ The church excommunicated suicides and forbade Christian funerals for them. Those who perished at their own hand could not be buried in consecrated ground. In medieval times, suicides’ corpses were publicly desecrated by civil authorities as a deterrent to others. In France the bodies of suicides were dragged through the streets. In Germany suicides were put in barrels and floated down rivers so they could not return to their hometown. In Norway suicides were buried in the forest with criminals. Until recently Amish communities buried suicides outside the boundaries of the community cemetery.⁵

Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* is something of a case study in traditional attitudes toward death and forgiveness for sin. While Hamlet is most known for his “To be or not to be” soliloquy in act 3, Hamlet’s first soliloquy in act 1, scene 2, is actually the play’s most explicit reference to suicide. There Hamlet laments, “O . . . that the Everlasting had not fix’d His canon ’gainst self-slaughter!”⁶ Hamlet is distressed that God has written a law against suicide, because he is in despair and considering it.

Then in act 1, scene 5, Hamlet encounters the ghost of his father, who has been murdered by Hamlet’s uncle Claudius. While the king slept, his brother poured poison into his ear. “Thus was I, sleeping, by a brother’s hand of life, of crown, of queen at once dispatched,” says the ghost of King Hamlet. The ghost emphasizes that his murder was made more tragic by the fact that he was asleep at the time of death, preventing him the opportunity to repent of his sins.

Cut off even in the blossoms of my sin,
Unhouseled, disappointed, unaneled,





No reckoning made, but sent to my account
With all my imperfections on my head.

Because Hamlet's father died without confession, his spirit was denied entry to heaven and is instead "doomed for a certain term to walk the night, and for the day confined to fast in fires."⁷

Later on, in act 3, scene 3, Hamlet comes upon his father's murderer, Claudius, kneeling in prayer considering his evil deeds. Hamlet realizes that this would be an opportune time to avenge his father: "Now might I do it pat, now 'a is a-praying." He draws his sword, ready to kill Claudius, but then reconsiders.

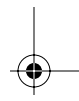
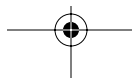
And so 'a goes to heaven.
And so am I revenged. That would be scanned:
A villain kills my father, and for that,
I, his sole son, do this same villain send
To heaven.⁸

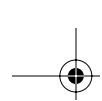
His uncle is presumably repenting of his sins and being forgiven of his crimes. Hamlet reasons that if he were to strike him dead now, Claudius would go directly to heaven in his forgiven state. So he withdraws, plotting to kill his uncle at a later time.

If we put all these pieces together, we see that Hamlet (and presumably most citizens of medieval Christendom) believed that to die unforgiven, without confession of sin, leads to damnation or at least purgatory, while those who die having repented of their misdeeds are qualified for heaven. This view of repentance and forgiveness implies that Claudius is bound for heaven only until his next evil deed. He is then doomed until he is able to repent once again for all his wrongs.

Based on such an understanding, many Christians throughout church history have considered suicide an unforgivable sin because it allows no possibility of repentance. But virtually all deaths occur without wholly cleansed consciences. If someone dies from a sudden heart attack, chances are that person died without asking for forgiveness for any number of sins.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer argued that to expect complete repentance in the final moment of life is unrealistic, observing, "Many Christians





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have died sudden deaths without having repented of all their sins.”⁹ Another commentator says, “Suicides are not alone in dying in an unrepentant state: others—perhaps most of us—will die with unrepented sins.”¹⁰ Ethicist and theologian Gilbert Meilaender writes,

Contrary to what Christians have often believed, such rational suicide does not necessarily damn one. The suicide dies, so to speak, in the moment of sinning, without opportunity to repent. But then, so may I be killed instantly in a car accident while plotting revenge against an enemy of mine. God judges persons, not individual deeds, and the moment in one’s life when a sinful deed occurs does not determine one’s fate.¹¹

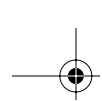
Christians affirm that at conversion God forgives all our sins—past, present and future, once and for all. This suggests we need not be as troubled over whether our loved one has asked for forgiveness for all their sins before the suicide. Christian salvation is not dependent on whether a person was able to “wipe the slate clean” at the moment of death, but rather whether the person was walking in relationship with God in life.

Suicide in the Bible

The Bible records seven acts of suicide. Abimelech, mortally wounded, asked his armor bearer to run him through with his sword (Judges 9:52-54). Samson pushed aside the supporting pillars of a temple, killing himself and all within it (Judges 16:28-31). King Saul, wounded in battle, fell on his own sword, and his armor bearer did likewise (1 Samuel 31:4-6). Ahithophel hanged himself when his counsel was rejected (2 Samuel 17:23). King Zimri set his palace on fire and burned himself to death (1 Kings 16:18). The only case of suicide in the New Testament is Judas Iscariot, who hanged himself after betraying Jesus (Matthew 27:3-5; Acts 1:18).

All these accounts are straightforward narratives; none offers any particular comment on the act of suicide. In fact, while the Bible condemns murder in general, it nowhere condemns suicide in particular. The strange silence of Scripture on the morality of suicide has led





some people to either one of two extremes. Some read far too much into these passages, seeing suicide as the unforgivable sin though it is not so described. Others minimize the acts entirely, arguing that because these suicides are not condemned, suicide is morally neutral or excusable.

The truth lies in between. Even though Scripture does not explicitly condemn suicide, the narratives all depict the suicide's fate negatively. Scripture's silence does not mean tacit approval or indifference.¹² The stories were meant to be instructive to future generations, portraying biblical suicides not as examples to be followed but rather as cautionary warnings of how not to go.

While Scripture casts all acts of suicide in a negative light, this does not mean that suicide always eternally separates the victim from God. On the contrary, Christian physician and medical examiner John Roos notes, "I have pointed out to the bereaved that Samson's suicidal death (Judges 16) did not exclude him from [the] list of the 'faithful' in Hebrews 11, and have found solace in this example."¹³

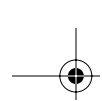
We should also note that according to Matthew 12:31-32, the "unforgivable sin" is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Most interpreters understand this as attributing the works of God to the power of the devil. There is no connection anywhere in Scripture between suicide and a sin that cannot be forgiven.

Interestingly enough, the Bible also records stories of at least seven people who despaired of life but did not go the way of suicide. These include Rebekah (Genesis 27:46), Rachel (Genesis 30:1), Moses (Numbers 11:10-15), Elijah (1 Kings 19:4), Job (Job 6:8-13; 10:1-22), Jonah (Jonah 4:3, 8) and the apostle Paul (2 Corinthians 1:8-9). These are positive role models for us, in contrast to those who chose death instead of life. "Given the clear examples throughout the Bible of men and women who thought about killing themselves and chose not to, we should follow their example."¹⁴

Hope for the Suicide

Christians, especially pastors and chaplains, often find themselves





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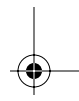
caught in a tension, wanting to offer comfort to a grieving family but unable to affirm with any confidence that the lost one is in heaven. What I have found helpful is to understand that salvation and forgiveness of sins are more a *relational* matter of being a follower of God than a *transactional* matter of mechanically repenting for every misdeed.

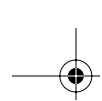
Many Christian traditions agree that a person will not be judged on the nature of his or her death but rather on the nature of his or her life. One act does not necessarily invalidate a person's entire life, especially if an act of desperation is completely uncharacteristic of that person's demonstrated moral identity. "There is an important distinction to be maintained between basic moral dispositions and single actions," writes New Testament scholar Luke Timothy Johnson. "Specific acts must be placed within the context of a person's character as revealed in consistent patterns of response."¹⁵ A person's fundamental disposition is more defining of his or her moral character than an isolated act.

In other words, the single act of suicide does not negate a person's entire moral identity. If a loved one has aimed to live a life of Christian discipleship, of faith, hope and love, then we can see the act of suicide as an aberration. In such cases we may well understand the suicide as a tragic twist of an otherwise good life, not the inevitable end of a self-destructive life.

Suicide also raises the question of intent. If suicidal people are overwhelmed by the agony of their despair, are they morally responsible for their choice? Does God provide grace for those who do not fully know what they are doing? This suggests a larger question: whether God accepts those who do not have the capacity to make a conscious decision to believe in God, such as infants, mentally handicapped people or those with Down syndrome.

Jesus said that those who would enter the kingdom of God must become like little children. Many Christians interpret this as meaning that God's grace extends to the mentally handicapped, who often display the kind of childlike faith and trust that Jesus described, even if





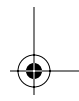
they are incapable of articulating explicit faith in God. Some theologians have argued that God—being perfectly fair and just, as well as loving and merciful—is able to discern how people *would have* responded to his invitation to follow him had they had the mental capacity to understand and choose.

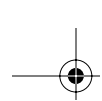
Simply put, some people truly desire to be with God. They want to participate in a continual, personal, active relationship with him. Heaven, then, is the natural result of that relationship. They want to go to heaven because they want to be with God.

On the other hand, other people just do not care about God. They do not think about spiritual things and have no interest in having a relationship with God. Why, then, would they *want* to go to heaven? If heaven is the ultimate culmination of all things spiritual and godly, then those who do not have any desire to be in relationship with God would have no reason to want to be in heaven. Christians throughout the centuries have maintained that God does not *send* people to hell; rather, people say no to God and choose the path away from him on their own volition and free will. Those who do not care about the things of God in this life continue on that trajectory in the life to come.

This may be of little consolation to those who grieve the death of a loved one and who are uncertain of that person's eternal condition. But it can provide hope to those of us who grieve a suicide. Imagine that all his life Bill has been a faithful believer in God. He has been a committed Christian, seeking to live a life in relationship with God and wanting to follow his will. Of course he does so imperfectly and experiences ups and downs in his daily life, but his aim is to walk with Jesus as best he can.

But for some reason, despair overtakes Bill. Perhaps there has been a chemical disturbance somewhere in his brain. Perhaps he has lost his job, or his wife or children, and he sinks into a severe clinical depression. He is beyond consolation, and his friends wonder if he's even really the same person he was before. One night, in utter despondency, to end his pain, Bill takes his own life.





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How should his loved ones think of his passing? What will the pastor say at his funeral?

Christians do not hold the false hope that all who die regardless of faith will go to heaven. We take Jesus seriously when he says that there are two paths, one to life and another to destruction, and people will wind up in one of two eternal destinies (Matthew 25:31-46). We take seriously the reality that there is a heaven and a hell, and all of us will someday see one or the other.¹⁶

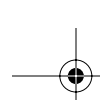
But that destiny is never arbitrarily determined. In Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* Jacob Marley's ghost tells Ebenezer Scrooge, "These are the chains I forged in life." Our decisions in this life forge our future destiny.

We also affirm that God will be fair. He is a righteous judge. In human courts, the best judges take all evidence into account. God, infinite in knowledge, knows all of Bill's circumstances. He knows his heart and commitment to faith. He will respond to Bill's life and death with complete fairness and understanding.

If a person dies of cancer, God does not hold that cancer against him. God considers the state of his soul, not merely his ravaged body. If the person enters into eternal life, his body is supernaturally resurrected to a new body, free from cancer and any other earthly frailties. Likewise, God will consider the state of a suicide's soul, not merely the mind which may have been misled and confused at the time of the suicide. God is just and perfect in wisdom, and he is able to tell which acts and beliefs were truly volitional and which were not. Should that person be welcomed into eternal life, her mind will be restored, healed of all depression and given full capacity to renew a joyous relationship with God.

The Bible even offers hope for the person who has had a lifelong trajectory away from God. The Bible records that two thieves were crucified along with Jesus, one on either side. One hurled insults at Jesus, but the other called to Jesus for mercy: "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:42-43).





This thief most likely was a career criminal, a bandit who had lived as a predator on society; he probably was never part of Jewish religious culture. He had given no thought to God, only to what he could get away with. But he had a change of mind and heart in his last moments. Jesus tells him (and us) that repentance, even on one's deathbed, is sufficient. God is merciful. Those who call upon the Lord will be saved.

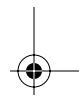
This gives us hope for even the person who has spent his entire life without a concern for God. Imagine that Bill is an entirely godless atheist who never once considers God. Not only does he ignore God, he actively mocks him and those who believe in him. He takes pleasure in the things of this world with no thought or regard for the welfare of others.

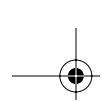
One day it all catches up with him. He crosses the line one time too many, and the game is up. Hunted by the police, with squad cars closing in, Bill finally has a change of heart. He takes a few final minutes for silent surrender to the God of the universe whom he only now acknowledges. He tells God that there's no way he can atone for all the wrongs he has done, and the only way he can make things right is to remove himself from this world. So he places a gun to his head and pulls the trigger.

Is there hope for Bill in this scenario? If we believe the Bible, including Jesus' words to the thief on the cross next to him, we must say yes, there is hope even for a penitent criminal suicide. The majority of suicides leave no note behind, no record or indication of their final mental state. Who is to say whether or not those suicides, in their final moments, did business with God and made things right? The miracle of salvation is that God can forgive even the most heinous sinner. No one is beyond hope.

The Comfort of Not Knowing

Diane, whose brother killed himself in college, had assumed the traditional perspective that all suicides go to hell. But eventually she realized that this may not be the case. She spent a summer taking





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care of a missionary family's kids. One day Diane said in passing, "Well, I know my brother is in hell because he committed suicide."

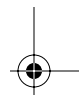
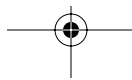
The missionary mother didn't say anything at first, but the next day she gently challenged Diane: "That might be something you want to look into a little bit more, because I'm not really sure that it's true."

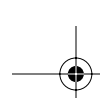
"I just never really thought about it," Diane remembers. "She opened the door for me to look at that again." Diane's mind was opened to the possibility that suicide is not an unforgivable sin. Perhaps suicides don't automatically go to hell. "I started to see that suicide might be a sin, but it's a sin like other sins. It doesn't necessarily mean that this person is in hell. I don't know where my brother was at. I just don't know. But honestly, I'm grateful to be in a place of not knowing."

There is an odd sort of comfort in ignorance. This doesn't mean that our loved ones are actually in hell and we just delude ourselves into thinking they aren't. Nor is it a blind insistence that they are in heaven. No, it is a simple resignation to the reality that some things are beyond human knowledge, at least in this life. We simply do not know the ultimate fate of those who are gone. But God gives us hope. Not certainty, but hope.

Theologian Lewis Smedes was asked, "Is suicide unforgivable? What is the biblical hope and comfort we can offer a suicide victim's family and friends?" His response was: "Will Jesus welcome home a believer who died at her own hands? I believe he will, tenderly and lovingly. My biblical basis? It is the hope-giving promise of Romans 8:32, that neither life nor death can separate the believer from the love of God in Christ Jesus." Jesus died for all of our sins, including suicide.

Smedes points out that most people who choose suicide do not mean to sin against God. Those who attempt suicide "do not so much choose death as stumble down into it from a steep slope of despair." Many who kill themselves are "not people sticking their fists in the face of God. These are children who look in their own faces and hate what they see." The true killers, says Smedes, are despair, depression,





hopelessness and self-loathing. These are our most urgent problems, not the question of the morality of suicide. We should worry less about whether suicides go to heaven and more about how to help the suicidal find hope and meaning.¹⁷

Even Catholicism, often thought to consign all suicides to hell, holds out hope for the suicide. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says, “We should not despair of the eternal salvation of persons who have taken their own lives. By ways known to him alone, God can provide the opportunity for salutary repentance.”¹⁸

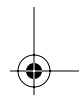
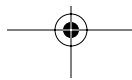
We can find comfort that in God’s justice our loved one’s actions may be seen in light of their circumstances. “Grave psychological disturbances, anguish, or grave fear of hardship, suffering, or torture can diminish the responsibility of the one committing suicide.”¹⁹

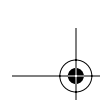
It is not for us to speculate on a suicide’s final destination. I have stopped worrying about my father’s eternal fate. It does me no good to wonder about things that are impossible to know. “Ultimate judgments about the person are not therefore ours to make, and we can condemn the act of suicide without claiming to render such a verdict.”²⁰ While I am hopeful that I will see my father again someday, I cannot cling to a false hope and claim with certainty that he is in heaven. That is not for me to say.

It is comforting, however, to know that the God of the universe is good and just and can be trusted to do the right thing. He is both righteous and merciful, and he understands the pain of both the victims and the survivors of suicide. Only God knows the fate of those we grieve. Ultimately we must place our trust in his goodness and mercy.

Suicide as Tragedy

In considering the wrongfulness of suicide, we can be tempted to make one of two equal and opposite errors. One is to think of suicide as an unforgivable sin. The other is to not consider it a sin at all. The first position makes the error of treating suicide too harshly; the second makes the error of treating it too lightly.





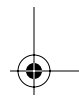
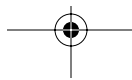
A more balanced position is to consider suicide a tragedy. In literary terms, a tragedy is the story of a tragic protagonist who is undone by a fatal flaw. “Often the tragic hero comes to a moment of perception, usually an insight into what he or she has done wrong to set the forces of retribution in motion. As the tragic plot unfolds, the tragic hero becomes gradually isolated from others. Tragedies typically end with the death of the hero.”²¹ A tragedy is a situation where a good person’s human frailties and failures lead to self-destruction.

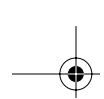
The suicides recorded in the Bible, especially the stories of King Saul and Judas, fit this archetype of tragedy. Saul’s life, like a Greek or Shakespearean tragedy, can be charted as rise and fall, from the heroic young king to the troubled and ultimately doomed warrior. Judas, likewise, is a once-trusted confidant who is seduced into treachery and self-destruction. Judged by moral categories, their actions are simply wrong and sinful, but reading with a literary sensibility, we see in their lives the motif of tragedy.

While all suicides are tragic to some degree, different circumstances and reasons for suicide make us interpret individual suicides differently. A young mother whose baby died in an accident might kill herself out of grief and a desire to be reunited with her child. Though we lament her decision, we are far more sympathetic with her than with Hitler’s suicide in his bunker at the end of World War II. Hitler’s death was the result of a life wasted in evil, while the young mother’s death is a catastrophic expression of maternal love.

“In tragedy, sin is surely one of the forces at work, but it is by no means the only force and sometimes not even the most obvious one.”²² In other words, suicide is wrong and is a serious sin, but not one that is unforgivable. The motif of tragedy compels us to understand our loved one’s final act in the context of the full story of his or her life. In the tragedy of suicide, our loved ones fought against an enemy within. They lost their battle against themselves. While part of them may well deserve God’s judgment, another part may well receive God’s mercy.

Psychologist John White writes, “Let us grant that suicide is not





only tragic but sinful. Let us accept that life is a precious gift from God and that issues of life and death belong to their Author. But let us look on those who take their lives with the same compassion with which Jesus looked on all sinners. Indeed if compassion is called for, surely some suicide victims call for more compassion than other sinners.”²³

Are Suicides Martyrs?

Some recent writers have claimed that early Christians so honored martyrdom that they celebrated and even pursued their own deaths. Arthur Droge and James Tabor have equated suicide with martyrdom in their book *A Noble Death*, calling them both forms of “voluntary death.” These and other revisionists say that because the early martyrs’ deaths were considered praiseworthy, so too should we today affirm and celebrate such “voluntary deaths” as physician-assisted suicide and euthanasia.

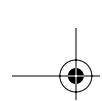
However, this argument is a gross misapplication of a mistaken reading of history. Death by martyrdom during persecution by Christianity’s opponents is hardly comparable to most contemporary suicides. Most martyrs did not take their own lives; they were killed by their oppressors. Even if they gave up their own lives willingly, this doesn’t mean that they had a death wish. If they had not been persecuted by the Romans, they would not have been killed.

Meilaender clarifies:

Christians generally forbade suicide, but they honored their martyrs. Why? How can they honor someone whose own choice so certainly results in her death? They honor the martyr because she does not *aim* at her death. She aims to be faithful to God, foreseeing as a likely result the loss of her life. Forbidding suicide and honoring martyrs, Christians recognized life as a real but not ultimate good—a great good, but not the highest good.²⁴

Most of our loved ones did not take their own life because they were being threatened on account of their faith. Someone else did not kill them. In most cases, the suicides we grieve were killed by





their own volition, without coercion or persecution from without. So we cannot equate our loved ones' actions with those of the ancient martyrs. That is simply a category mistake. True martyrs are still dying for their faith around the world today, and to equate their actions with suicide dishonors them.

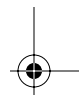
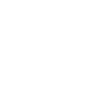
In rare cases, true martyrs may kill themselves in order to affirm a higher commitment to God. During World War II, an orthodox Jewish girls' school in Nazi-occupied territory had been spared extermination in order to provide sexual services to the Gestapo. To avoid being violated, the students, ranging from age twelve to eighteen, gathered together with their teachers, recited a final prayer and poisoned themselves to death. They are now known as "the ninety-three maidens."²⁵

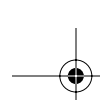
While some theologians like Augustine would still condemn such deaths, philosopher Robert N. Wennberg argues that this sort of suicide "declares that one lives by a higher loyalty and thereby sanctifies the name of God. In ending one's life in these circumstances, one affirms in death the values and the commitments to God by which one lived. In such circumstances suicide is not a repudiation of those values but an affirmation of them."²⁶

What About the Criminal Suicide?

My friend Lauren called one day and asked if I had heard about a murder-suicide that had taken place the previous weekend. Kathleen Roskot, a nineteen-year-old sophomore at Columbia University, had been found murdered in her dorm room. Shortly afterward her boyfriend, Thomas Nelford, threw himself in front of a subway train and killed himself. Lauren, a graduate student at Columbia, was writing an article about the situation, and her editor, a secular Jew, had taken the position that it was good that the murderer killed himself. Good riddance, in essence.

Lauren wanted to know what I thought of the murderer's suicide, from the standpoint of the Christian faith. It seemed to me that we couldn't say that the suicide in any sense resolved the tragedy of the





murder; if anything, it compounded the pain—one tragedy on top of another.

What do we make of the suicide of a murderer? Regarding the perpetrator's eternal destiny, we must plead ignorance, since only God knows the state of his soul. But it seems to me that our stance toward him should be lament, not satisfaction or vindictiveness. In this case, we grieve for the female student as the victim of a senseless murder. And in a different way, we also grieve for the male student as the victim of a senseless self-murder.

I was reminded of the April 1999 killings at Columbine High School, when Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold killed twelve classmates and a teacher and then killed themselves. The pastor who officiated at Dylan Klebold's funeral read 2 Samuel 18:33, where David laments the death of his treasonous son Absalom in one of the most emotional cries in all of Scripture: "O, my son Absalom! My son, my son!" Even when the death is that of a murderer, we grieve.

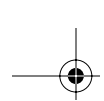
I told Lauren, "Even a murderer's life is still a life. There is intrinsic value of all life regardless of moral behavior. Because human beings were created in the image of God, the loss of any life is to be lamented."

No matter how fallen or corrupted, every human being was once an innocent child. Christians affirm that all people bear the image of God. Therefore any loss of human life is a tragedy to be mourned. As John Donne said, "Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind."²⁷ Because Christians affirm the inherent dignity of every human being, because we believe in the sanctity of all life, we cannot take glee in the deaths of criminals and murderers. We rather grieve that things went so horribly wrong in the perpetrators' lives that they came to harm others. We must not demonize them and see them only in terms of evil. Rather, they too were the victims of evil. Even somebody like Hitler, who seems to us the very embodiment of evil, was a human being created in the image of God; his awful, tragic life is also to be mourned.

Here is how Lauren concluded her article:

In wrestling with how to respond to the suicide of a murderer, we





might do well to recall a violent death recounted in Hebrew Scripture. We learn in the book of Exodus that after the Red Sea parted, the Israelites crossed to the other side, but when the Egyptians tried to chase them, the walls of the sea collapsed and the Egyptians drowned. According to a midrash, the angels in heaven began to cheer, but God silenced them, saying: "You may not cheer. The Israelites are free and my plan for their redemption is unfolding, but some of my other children are dead, so you may not cheer."

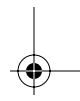
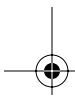
God doesn't ask the angels to cry for the Egyptians. But he does remind them that the death of even the vilest of his creations is a somber moment.²⁸

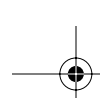
We often forget that this earth is caught in a cosmic conflict between good and evil, with powers and principalities at work beyond our detection. One theologian writes, "In the Christian view, then, the earth has been literally sieged by a power outside itself. There is a power of pure evil which now affects everything and everybody on the earth. . . . We are, like Normandy in World War II, caught in the crossfire of a cosmic battle. And on battlefields, as you know, all sorts of terrible things happen."²⁹ Humanity is caught in the crossfire, and in any war there are casualties. Human victims of murder and suicide are casualties in the battle waged between God and Satan.

We will never know Thomas Nelford's final thoughts as he stood on the subway platform. The killing of Kathleen Roskot may have happened in a fit of rage, and afterward he very well may have come to understand the horrible magnitude of his crime. Perhaps his suicide was merely a cowardly way to escape criminal prosecution. Or perhaps he decided that the only way to atone for his girlfriend's death was to pay with his own life. We simply cannot know. But either way, he was still a person created in the image of God, and we lament his taking of his life. Perhaps his parents would identify with Dylan Klebold's parents in David's lament: "If only I had died instead of you, my son, my son!"

Forgiving the Suicide

There is another sense in which survivors wonder if suicide is unfor-





givable. In taking their own lives, our loved one has hurt us immeasurably. Can we bring ourselves to forgive them?

Without excusing their act, we can say what Jesus said on the cross: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” Those who choose suicide usually don’t realize how much trauma and grief they inflict on us survivors. Even though we feel hurt, angry and betrayed, we can come to forgive them because their final thoughts were preoccupied with ending their own pain. They did not know what they were doing to us.

This may not be something we can do quickly or easily. It may take months or years. We may or may not sense the need for it. Chris, who had learned to forgive a man who shot him and left him for dead, said: “There is a very pragmatic reason for forgiving. When we are wronged, we can either respond by seeking revenge, or we can forgive. If we choose revenge, our lives will be consumed by anger. When vengeance is served, it leaves us empty. Anger is a hard urge to satisfy and can become habitual. But forgiveness allows us to move on.”³⁰

We survivors of suicide know we have been wronged. We have been victimized by our own loved one, in an act of intense betrayal. But there is no point in harboring resentment. We cannot seek revenge. Our loved ones have already sought vengeance upon themselves. So we grieve them as victims, and we forgive them for the wrong they perpetrated on themselves and on us. After all, if suicide is forgivable by God, it can be forgivable by us. We can forgive them, for they knew not what they did.

