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Does Suicide Exempt the Deceased from the Hope of Future Redemption?

Dr. Karen E. Mason
Associate Professor of Counseling and Psychology
Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, South Hamilton, MA¹

Introduction 1
I. Some Views on Eternal Security 2
II. Some Views on Suicide and Sin 3
III. Pastoral Care and Suicide 10
 A. Pastoral Care Perspectives on Suicide 10
 B. Pastoral Care of the Suicidal Individual 11
 C. Ten Christian Perspectives on Home 12
 D. Pastoral Care Following a Suicide Attempt 16
 E. Pastoral Care Following a Suicide 17
Summary 19
Associations and Alliances 19

Introduction

In the United States, suicide is the 11th leading cause of death across all ages, with homicide the 15th and AIDS the 20th cause of

¹ See KMmason@gordonconwell.edu at www.GCTS.edu. With Pablo Polischuk and Ray Pendleton, she has received the Lilly Theological Research Grant for their project Protestant Clergy Referral of Suicidal Persons, and has recently been awarded another Lilly grant on Clergy Engagement in Suicide Intervention and Aftercare with James D. Wines with McLean Hospital/Harvard Medical School, Alcohol and Drug Abuse Research Center.

Her publications include *When the Pieces Don't Fit: Making Sense of Life's Puzzles* (Grand Rapids, MI: Discovery House Publishers, 2008); with P.A. Olmos, D. Bacon, M. McQuilken, A. Henley, S. Fisher, "Exploring the Consumer's and Provider's Perspective on Service Quality in Community Mental Health Care," *Community Mental Health Journal* 40:1 (2004, February), 33-46; and "Who Is a Virtuous Woman?—a Study of the Hebrew *eshet chayil* in Proverbs 31," *Priscilla Papers*, 4:1 (Winter, 1990), 5-8.

death.² In the U.S. 10-24 year-old age group, suicide is the third leading cause of death. The World Health Organization has found that in the world for every death due to war, there are three deaths due to homicide and five deaths due to suicide.³ Every year, almost one million people in the world die⁴ from suicide.⁵ Suicide is a serious problem. Suicide also poses theological questions.

I. Some Views on Eternal Security

The question posed in this article is: “Does Suicide Exempt the Deceased from the Hope of Future Redemption?” The answer to this question will depend on one’s view of eternal security and also on one’s view of the sinfulness of suicide. First, eternal security will be discussed, then the sinfulness of suicide.

Eternal security is defined as the view that a believer is secure in his or her salvation eternally. Two of the most well-known perspectives on eternal security include Calvinism and Wesleyan Arminianism. The classical Calvinist perspective is rooted in a focus on the sovereignty of God who is “the sole actor in the salvation of his human creatures” and who preserves the elect in a state of eternal grace.⁶ Wesleyan Arminianism is rooted in a focus on the interplay between God’s prevenient grace and human free will in salvation, and “the resistibility of grace and the possibility of apostasy.”⁷ Other beliefs about eternal security can be found on a spectrum with these two perspectives on either end.

The reason that eternal security has been debated throughout the ages is that both positions find support in the Bible. For example, in Romans 8:29-30 we read that,

For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he

² Centers for Disease Control and Prevention <http://webappa.cdc.gov/cgi-bin/broker.exe> Retrieved March 24, 2011.

³ World Health Organization www.WHO.int/features/factfiles/injuries/facts/en/index1.html Retrieved March 24, 2011.

⁴ The preferred “die by suicide” is used instead of the conventional “commit suicide.”

⁵ World Health Organization, retrieved March 24, 2011: www.WHO.int/mental_health/prevention/suicide/suicideprevent/en/index.html.

⁶ J. Matthew Pinson, *4 Views on Eternal Security* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 9.

⁷ Ibid, 18.

justified, he also glorified.” And in Hebrews 6:4-6 we read, “It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age and who have fallen away, to be brought back to repentance. To their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace.

As noted by Steven Harper, “We must not conclude that a single view completely encompasses the topic.”⁸

There seems to be a paradoxical interplay between God’s work and ours, as we read in Philippians 2:12:

Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.

For some Christians, the opposites are kept in tension within the mystery of God or a *via media*. For example, in classic Anglicanism, there is “one Canon (one Bible), two Testaments, three Creeds, four General Councils, five centuries and the series of Fathers in that period” which determine the boundaries of faith.⁹ Anything not defined by these are left to the mystery of God. Because the Apostles, Nicene, and Athanasian creeds are silent on the issue of eternal security, evangelical Christians may differ in their views.

As applied to suicide, a Calvinist approach would argue that a Christian who dies by suicide would remain secure in salvation. A Wesleyan Arminian approach would argue that a Christian who dies by suicide could in the act of suicide either commit a sin that remains unconfessed or the sin of apostasy, either of which might result in damnation.¹⁰ However, one’s approach would depend on one’s view on the sinfulness of suicide.

II. Some Views on Suicide and Sin

Another frequently posed theological question is whether or not suicide is a sin. This is an important question to address because, if suicide is not a sin, then eternal security may not be relevant to the

⁸ Steven Harper, “A Wesleyan Arminian View,” in J. Matthew Pinson, *4 Views on Eternal Security* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 210.

⁹ Bishop Lancelot Andrews (1555-1626).

¹⁰ Harper, “A Wesleyan Arminian View,” in Pinson, 239.

discussion.

A spectrum of beliefs on suicide and sin also exists. For example, on one side of the spectrum, some, such as the Unitarian Universalists, do not adhere to specific doctrines and therefore do not include in their beliefs the concepts of sin or eternal security. On another side of the spectrum, Roman Catholics are known for their belief that suicide is an unforgivable mortal sin, although more recently they allow more latitude on this belief.¹¹ Mortal sins (like murder) were believed to condemn a person to Hell unless forgiven and absolved. Suicide (self-murder) was viewed as a mortal sin and unforgivable/unabsolvable because the sin occurs concurrently with death, and it was thought that a person could not have received forgiveness or absolution and was therefore damned to Hell.

In the current Roman Catholic view, suicide is forbidden by the fifth commandment and is viewed as contrary to “justice, hope and charity.”¹² It is the sin of not loving God, self and neighbor because suicide

is gravely contrary to the just love of self. It likewise offends love of neighbor because it unjustly breaks the ties of solidarity with family, nation, and other human societies to which we continue to have obligations. Suicide is contrary to love for the living God.¹³

On the other hand, the Roman Catholic church has included in its current catechism that “Grave psychological disturbances, anguish, or grave fear of hardship, suffering, or torture can diminish the responsibility of the one committing suicide” and that

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. The Church prays for persons who have taken their own lives.¹⁴

Within an evangelical tradition, there are various perspectives.¹⁵ One can find evangelicals who believe that suicide is not sin and that a person who kills him or herself is a victim of depression and

¹¹ See Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraphs 2280-2283.

¹² See paragraph 2325.

¹³ See paragraph 2281.

¹⁴ See paragraph 2282 and 2283.

¹⁵ See the National Association of Evangelicals’ Statement of Faith for a definition of “evangelical” at www.NAE.net/about-us/statement-of-faith, retrieved March 24, 2011.

depressed people are not responsible for any sin or have diminished responsibility for sin.

Related to this discussion is the question whether Christians can become depressed, given that depression is related to about two thirds of all U.S suicides.¹⁶ An example of a depressed Christian might include C.H. Spurgeon, the 19th century revivalist, who, in 1866, told his congregation: “I am the subject of depressions of spirit so fearful that I hope none of you ever gets to such extremes of wretchedness as I go to.”¹⁷ Martin Luther's biographer, Roland Bainton, wrote that Luther experienced recurrent depressions and anxiety called *Anfechtungen*.¹⁸

Because people are body, soul and spirit (1 Thessalonians 5:23), depression is not always an entirely spiritual decision. Depression is sometimes biologically-based with spiritual effects: a depressed brain, a despondent soul and a hopeless spirit. Mark McMinn in *Sin and Grace in Christian Counseling* distinguishes three types of sin:

1. *Sinfulness*, our general state of brokenness, like biological vulnerability to depression;
2. *Sin* or sinful acts, like committing murder; and
3. *Consequences of Sin*, like vulnerability to depression because of a parent's abuse.¹⁹

For many people, depression falls in the first aspect of brokenness or the third aspect of the result of someone else's sin toward us.

In the Bible we find people who struggled with a constellation of symptoms that fits depression. Psalm 102 captures the despondent prayer “of an afflicted man when he is faint and pours out his lament before the Lord.” This man beseeches God not to hide His face (v2); he describes his heart as “blighted and withered” (v4); he says that he forgets to eat (v4), lies awake at night (v7), and mingles his drink with his tears (v9), because his enemies taunt him (v8) and because he feels God has thrown him aside (v10). We read about the

¹⁶ American Association of Suicidology, retrieved May 22, 2008 from www.Suicidology.org/associations/1045/files/Depression.pdf.

¹⁷ C.H. Spurgeon (1866), “Joy and Peace in Believing” Sermon #692, retrieved May 23, 2008, from www.SpurgeonGems.org/vols10-12/chs692.pdf.

¹⁸ R. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther*. (NY: Abingdon Press, 1950).

¹⁹ Mark McMinn, *Sin and Grace in Christian Counseling* (Downer's Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 154.

despondency of Job (Job 3:24), Elijah (1 Kings 19:4), Jonah (Jonah 4:8), and Jeremiah (Jeremiah 20:18). This perspective argues that depression, which is characterized by depressed mood, diminished interest, difficulty concentrating, lack of energy and overwhelming guilt, changes a person's functioning to the extent that it is not possible for a depressed person to make rational decisions and the person is therefore not guilty of sin or has diminished responsibility. For some Christians, suicide within the context of depression would not be sin any more than getting the flu would be. If a Christian adheres to this position, eternal security is a moot point because suicide is not a sin. Of course, this position may not apply to suicides consciously chosen such as in some cult suicides or some murder suicides.

A related position is that suicide is not a sin because the Bible mentions suicide six times, but none of these narratives mention the sinfulness of suicide.²⁰ What stands out in reading the accounts of Abimelech (Judges 9:52-54), Samson (Judges 16:30), Saul (1 Samuel 31:4), Ahithophel (2 Samuel 17:23), Zimri (1 Kings 16:18), and Judas (Matthew 27:5; Acts 1:18) is that none of the accounts condemns suicide and the manner of death is not associated with dishonor. Samson and Ahithophel are buried in the family tomb. Saul and his sons were honored by a proper burial by the Israelite men of Jabesh-Gilead. David's lament for Saul and Jonathan (2 Samuel 1:19-27) passes no condemnation on Saul's manner of death. If a Christian adheres to this position, eternal security again is a moot point because suicide is not a sin.

A third evangelical position is that God will demand an accounting for each human life (Genesis 9:5-6). Suicide is a sin because of the 6th commandment: "You shall not murder" (Exodus 20: 13). This was Augustine's position. He wrote "the law, rightly interpreted, prohibits suicide, where it says, 'You shall not kill'" and "no man ought to inflict on himself voluntary death ... for those who die by their own hand have no better life after death" and "it is therefore wicked to kill oneself."²¹ He argued against suicide because

²⁰ G. Lloyd Carr and Gwendolyn C. Carr, *Fierce Goodbye: Living in the Shadow of Suicide* (Herald Press, 2004).

²¹ *City of God*, 1.20 (for bk 1, chap.), 1.26 (see also Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae*, 2a2ae, q. 64, a.5), and 1.27, respectively.

Christ never recommended it, because Christians should live lives of faith and trust in God especially in the midst of suffering, and because death cuts off the possibility of repentance.²²

It is important to note that Augustine wrote on the topic of suicide within the context of condemning martyrdom.²³ He wrote specifically as a polemic against Donatist martyrdom.²⁴ For example, earlier in the fourth century, St. Ambrose praised Pelagia's martyrdom-suicide.²⁵ Jacques Bels points out that, while Early Church views merged suicide and martyrdom, Augustine clarifies the distinction between martyrdom and suicide.²⁶ Augustine wrote that suicide should be distinguished from voluntary martyrdom which is to God's glory.²⁷ Furthermore, voluntary martyrdom occurs

prompted by divine wisdom ... He, then, who knows it is unlawful to kill himself, may nevertheless do so if he is ordered by Him whose commands we may not neglect. Only let him be very sure that the divine command has been signified.²⁸

That was the case of Samson. However, suicide is not to be considered an option for a Christian except in these very unusual circumstances. Generally, Augustine condemned suicide.

Among the evangelicals who believe that suicide is sin, many believe that the sin of suicide or self-murder is not any different from any other sin which God can forgive. In other words, because in a Protestant evangelical tradition there is no distinction between mortal and venial sins, suicide is like any other sin. The only unpardonable sin is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Jesus said, "And so I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven" (Matthew 12:31). A related sin is the "sin unto death" (1 John 5:16: "There is a sin that

²² *City of God*, 1.17, 22, 24, and 25.

²³ Arthur J. Droge, "Mori lucrum: Paul and Ancient Theories of Suicide," *Novum Testamentum* 30:3 (1988), 277.

²⁴ Jacques Bels, "L a mort volontaire dans l'oeuvre de saint Augustin," *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 187 (1975), 161.

²⁵ St. Ambrose of Milan, *Letters* (letters 31-40, 1881), 213-269. Retrieved March 24, 2011, letter 37 from www.CCEL.org/ccel/pearse/morefathers/files/ambrose_letters_04_letters31_40.htm.

²⁶ Bels, 164.

²⁷ John Donne, *Biathanatos* (Michael Rudick and M. Pabst Battin, *A Modern-Spelling Edition with Introduction and Commentary*; NY: Garland Publishing, 1982; 1st 1647), 81.

²⁸ *City of God*, 1.26.

leads to death”). Though neither of these passages specifies suicide, some evangelicals believe that suicide could be the unpardonable sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit in that it may represent a complete loss of faith in God. However, suicide as an unpardonable sin seems inconsistent with the lack of specificity in Matthew and 1 John, the lack of condemnation of suicide in the six passages where suicide is mentioned, and also the inconsistency with Galatians 5, where murder is listed as one sin in a long list of sins. This long list does not seem to elevate murder as a special sin. In Galatians 5:19-20, we read, “Now the actions of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity, promiscuity, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, rivalry, jealousy, outbursts of anger, quarrels, conflicts, factions, envy, *murder*, drunkenness, wild partying, and things like that.” This view would suggest that because Christians are all miserable sinners, all Christians are all equally in need of God’s grace and forgiveness. Justification by faith alone is an assertion that works are irrelevant to salvation and many evangelicals would assert that even our righteousness as Christians is as filthy rags (Isaiah 64:6). As in the Anglican liturgy, all Christians recognize that they do not come daily to God “trusting in our own righteousness, but in [God’s] manifold and great mercies [because God] is the same Lord whose property is always to have mercy.”²⁹ If any one of these sins (including murder) precludes a Christian from God’s forgiveness, then all humanity would despair of God’s forgiveness. For all Christians, the focus is on Christ’s righteousness and the intercessional ministry of the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:26-27) and Christ (Romans 8:34; Hebrews 7:24-25) resulting in God’s faithful sanctification:

May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it (1 Thessalonians 5:23, 24).

Among evangelicals who believe suicide is a sin like all other sins, some may believe that God cannot forgive an unconfessed or unrepented sin. In other words, does the absence of repentance and confession, which most likely occurs with suicide, affect God’s forgiveness of a sin? One perspective is that if suicide is no different

²⁹ Episcopal Church, *Book of Common Prayer* (Seabury Press, 1979), 337.

from a lie or jealousy, gossip, hatred, or envy, for example, then an unconfessed suicide is no different from an unconfessed lie or jealousy, gossip, hatred, or envy, which many Christians will have experienced in a lifetime as sinners saved by God's grace alone. These evangelicals would affirm that while God clearly condemns sin, the paradox is that He is also merciful (Exodus 34:6-7) and deals with our sin not as we deserve (Psalm 103:10) and can be trusted to be a fair judge (Isaiah 61:8).

Other Christians may invoke an eternal security perspective when approaching the issue of unconfessed sin. Greene-McCreight has argued that suicide is a transgression of the commandment to not kill, but writes,

mental illness can potentially damage the soul, since it preys on the brain and the mind, but it cannot destroy the soul, for God holds the soul in his hands...The Christian's relation with the triune God may not stop with suicide. Even though suicide is clearly an ultimate separation from fellow creatures, it is not more so than natural death. And natural death does not stop God from loving the soul, or the soul from loving God.³⁰

Some Wesleyan Arminians may believe that unconfessed sin damns a person to Hell, although Wesley himself could "hardly believe the possibility that grace would ever be eclipsed by human choice."³¹ In the context of unconfessed and unrepented sin, many evangelicals focus either on God's great mercy toward all sinners and/or on the notion of eternal security. Elected Christians are viewed as eternally secure in their salvation regardless of the sin of suicide because of Christ's payment for all sin. In the absence of God's mercy or Christians' eternal security, then damnation is the expectation following the unconfessed sin of self-murder.

It is important to consider carefully one's theology of suicide as it relates to eternal security primarily because people will pose theological questions to pastors and because denominational perspectives are not always clear given the panoply of options within an evangelical perspective. In interviews with pastors, our research team has noticed that pastors struggle with the inconsistency of telling

³⁰ Katheryn, Greene-McCreight, *Darkness Is My only Companion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2006), 97.

³¹ Steven Harper, "A Wesleyan Arminian View," in J. Matthew Pinson, *4 Views on Eternal Security* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 243.

suicidal individuals that suicide is a sin—as a deterrent—and talking about God’s mercy to loved ones who have lost someone to suicide—as a comfort to them. Because a variety of evangelical perspectives on suicide and sin exist, how, then, can pastors deal with a suicidal Christian or with families mourning a Christian who has died by suicide?

III. Pastoral Care and Suicide

A. Pastoral Care Perspectives on Suicide

My colleagues and I have interviewed a number of pastors about their experience with suicide. While many pastors report to us that suicidal people are focused on understanding their own suffering, others report the theological questions posed by suicidal people include: “If I kill myself, will I go to Hell?” Family members ask following a suicide: “My son, who killed himself, is he in Hell?”

How should a pastor approach suicide theologically?

A primary approach should be non-judgment. There are many biblical passages that warn Christians against judging another’s sin. For example, Jesus says in Matthew 7:1, “Do not judge, or you too will be judged.” There are also passages that warn against judging something as sin when it is not. When Jesus’ disciples tried to assign sin to a man’s blindness, Jesus said, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life” (John 9:1-3). God was angry with Job’s friends because they assumed he had sinned. God said to Eliphaz the Temanite, “I am angry with you and your two friends, because you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has” (Job 42:7). Judging is dangerous business. Even when a Christian believes that suicide as sin, stating that God will not forgive is making assertions about a highly debated area. Should our approach not be like Job’s, one of humility? “You asked, ‘Who is this that obscures my counsel without knowledge?’ Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know” (Job 42:3).

Despite the variety of views on suicide as sin, there tends to be agreement on God’s covenant relationship characterized by love and mercy and on His being a just judge. We cannot judge the deceased but we can be certain that God will judge fairly and with mercy and love, because none of us will be able to stand before our Judge

without his mercy and love. How might this perspective be applied pastorally? The following discussion looks, first, at pastoral approaches to suicidal individuals (including those who have attempted suicide), and then at pastoral approaches to families and friends following a suicide.

B. Pastoral Care of the Suicidal Individual

When talking to suicidal people who ask whether or not they are eternally secure if they die by suicide, pastors can speak from their particular theology on suicide and also on hope in God. We know from research that suicidal people typically struggle with a mental health problem like depression and that they feel hopeless. Hope springs eternal in the human breast, but not in those who are suicidal. They live painfully with eroded hope. They do not want to die as much as they want to find relief from the pain of hopelessness.

Some researchers have developed a technique for suicidal people called the Hope Box.³² The Hope Box is used to remind suicidal people of the things that have helped in the past or of hopeful actions that they could try now. Suicidal people can develop a Hope Box by putting in items that remind them of

- a time someone helped them in the past
- something they like to do that gives them hope
- something that helped in the past to prevent a suicide attempt
- a time when they felt proud of themselves, or
- a photograph of something that represents hope.

A Hope Box will be very personal. For example, it may include pictures that bring hope, such as pictures of the suicidal person's children. Clinically, the Hope Box will be part of a safety plan and spiritually, Christian faith has a lot to contribute to a Hope Box.

What is hope? Hope can be a wish, like wishing for a Ferrari—"I hope I drive a Ferrari someday." But hope in the Bible is much more. Hope is beyond our imaginative wishing. It is a confident ability to envision a more positive future, a confidence rooted in our faith in our God and His love for us. Where faith is the firm belief in God, hope

³² M.S. Berk, G.R. Henriques, D.M. Warman, G.K. Brown, & A.T. Beck, "A Cognitive Therapy Intervention for Suicide Attempters: An Overview of the Treatment and Case Examples," *Cognitive and Behavioral Practice* 11 (2004), 265–277.

is confidently holding onto a belief in a positive future--something difficult to do in the midst of a painful present. As Christians, our hope is based in our faithful certainty of who God is. Suicidal people need to be reminded of who our God is.

And sometimes we in the community of faith need to hold onto hope in our God for the person who cannot hold onto hope. In Tolkien's *Fellowship of the Ring* trilogy, we read that Sam and Frodo held onto hope for each other, repeating the Latin dictum, *Dum vita est spes est*, While there is life, there is hope. Greene-McCreight said, "Sometimes you literally cannot make it on your own, and you need to borrow from the faith of those around you."³³ In the community of faith, we need to stand as hopeful people for the suicidal person who no longer believes that anything can ever get better again. This is a bitter place to be. We can talk to suicidal person about the Christian hope.

As we focus on hope, it may be easy to turn hope into platitudes: "Don't worry. It'll get better. God is in control." Platitudes are true in one sense. They recognize that God is sovereign and that suicidality and depression ebb and flow. But they don't recognize or acknowledge the real suffering of a suicidal person. Our job is to share these truths, inviting gently into the discipline of hope, without hitting people over the head.

C. Ten Christian Perspectives on Home

1. Hope is the belief that God will not let down anyone who trusts in Him. "No one whose hope is in you will ever be put to shame" (Psalm 25:3). We can offer to hold onto hope for the suicidal person while they are struggling to hold onto theirs. Speaking of our faith in God through difficult times can be a way of sharing our hope with a suicidal person.

But the eyes of the LORD are on those who fear him,
on those whose hope is in his unfailing love,
to deliver them from death
and keep them alive in famine.
We wait in hope for the LORD;
he is our help and our shield.

³³ Greene-McCreight, 88.

In him our hearts rejoice,
for we trust in his holy name.
May your unfailing love rest upon us, O LORD,
even as we put our hope in you (Psalm 33:18-23).

2. We can talk about hope in God especially in adverse times. The psalmist is clear that adversity happens and our souls can feel downcast and depressed but that hope in God is what carries us through.

Why are you downcast, O my soul?
Why so disturbed within me?
Put your hope in God,
for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.
My soul is downcast within me; therefore I will remember you
from the land of the Jordan, the heights of Hermon—from
Mount Mizar (Psalm 42: 5-6).

3. We can talk about the fact that it is in times of adversity that we dig deep to find hope. Jeremiah writes about finding hope in noticing God's daily goodness. In fact we might encourage the suicidal person to start a "God's compassions" journal or a "hope box."

Yet this I call to mind
and therefore I have hope:
Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed,
for his compassions never fail.
They are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness (Lamentations 3:21-23).

Eugene Peterson puts it this way. "Juliana of Norwich was a fourteenth-century English nun, an anchorite, who steadily and courageously, through a suffering lifetime, looked the world's pain full in the face, and summed up her contemplation in the remarkable sentence, 'And all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.' From anyone else that sentence would risk ridicule as glib gibberish, but from this nun, 'thoughtful and

tough...in the exile of materials,' it is tempered truth, flexible and hard."³⁴

4. Another way we dig deep for hope is by waiting for God to act. Over and over we read about waiting for God. "I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I put my hope" (Psalm 130:5). The Bible is clear that waiting is not easy. "Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life" (Proverbs 13:12). It is difficult to wait for God to act, but by faith we believe that He will. "But those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint" (Isaiah 40:31). Sometimes we hang onto these promises in the midst of adversity and discouragement, as Jeremiah did. "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future" (Jeremiah 29:11). Where Micah starts chapter seven with "What misery is mine!" (Micah 7:1), the chapter ends with "But as for me, I watch in hope for the LORD, I wait for God my Savior; my God will hear me." (v7)

5. We are waiting for God to save us because He cares for the wounded and the hurting. As Anderson writes, "It is not the comfortable, the untroubled, the righteous, who revealed the healing and saving grace of God through Jesus. It was blind Bartimaeus, the despised Samaritan woman, the scorned prostitute, the desperate father of the demon-possessed boy, it was all of these that set the standard and determined the character of Jesus' ministry."³⁵

6. Hope is also based in the belief that sometimes the pain of today yields future reward. "Wounded oysters build out of gory wounds a pearl And create within the gap of pain a pearl."³⁶

Joseph exemplifies this when he tells his brothers that out of the pain of his slavery "God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" (Genesis 50:20). As Hollinger has written, a theology of death must include the belief that suffering is "a challenge to persevere and an opportunity to

³⁴ Eugene H. Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor: Returning to the Art of Spiritual Direction* (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1989), 84.

³⁵ R. Anderson, *The Soul of Ministry: Forming Leaders for God's People* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 222.

³⁶ Author unknown.

overcome,”³⁷ because, as Paul says, “We know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us” (Romans 5:3-5).

7. We also work to develop the discipline of hope by reminding ourselves daily that God and His Holy Spirit are present to save and are praying for us.

The Lord is near to the broken hearted and saves the crushed in Spirit (Psalm 34:18).

For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently. In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will (Romans 8:24-27).

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit (Romans 15:13).

8. We can talk to a suicidal person about God's sovereignty and his love. God is lovingly in control of what happens to us. Hope is acknowledging that as the psalmist said, “My times are in your hands” (Psalm 31:15). God is able to fulfill powerfully all of his promises to us. Hope believes that life, even a difficult life, still holds possibilities, especially for the future. It is the hope of longings fulfilled. We read in 2 Corinthians 1:20 that all our hopes are fulfilled in Christ: “For no matter how many promises God has made, they are ‘Yes’ in Christ.” In addition, an assertion related to God's sovereignty is that life belongs to God (I Samuel 2:6; Job 1:21) and we will account for all human life because humans bear God's image (Genesis 9:5-6). Hollinger writes, “God is thus the ultimate giver and culminator of human life.”³⁸

³⁷ Dennis Hollinger, “A Theology of Death,” in Timothy J. Demy and Gary P. Stewart, eds., *Suicide: A Christian Response; Crucial Considerations for Choosing Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1998), 261.

³⁸ Hollinger, “A Theology of Death,” in Demy and Stewart, *Suicide*, 264.

9. We also have the hope of the resurrection and a life without pain in the new world: “Where, O death, is your sting?” (See Hosea 13:14 and 1 Corinthians 15:55). And in Revelation 21:4, we read “God will wipe away every tear, and there will be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain, for the former things are passed away.” This truth nurtures hope because we know there is an expected end to our pain. Green-McCreight writes, “It is this future that redeems our present and allows us to have hope beyond mere optimism.”³⁹

10. Another hope is that we do not go through suffering alone but as a community. Many pastors have told us that they connect suicidal people to Stephen’s Ministers or deacons and that the ministry to a suicidal person is a church-wide ministry.

Hope is a virtue worth cultivating. Hope is worth talking about with a suicidal person and may be the most important discussion with a suicidal person who is experiencing a bitter lack of hope. It may be more important than talking about the sin of suicide or the grace of God’s forgiveness or eternal security. And because suicidal individuals are often struggling with depression or another mental health problem, refer them to a mental health professional who can help them deal with the illness they are experiencing. After your referral, stay connected and continue to feed them with the Christian foundation of hope, which is the love of the Father, the lavish sacrifice of His Son, and generous giving of the Holy Spirit.

D. Pastoral Care Following a Suicide Attempt

The church may be called upon to respond following a suicide attempt. One of the most important pieces of knowledge pastors need at this time is that the most powerful predictor of a later suicide is a previous attempt.⁴⁰ An important intervention at this stage is making sure that the person is referred for mental health care and that the person follows up with mental health care. It is also important for pastors and the congregation to stay connected and continue to connect them with the Christian hope.

³⁹ Greene-McCreight, 161.

⁴⁰ See Thomas Joiner, *Why People die by Suicide* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 62, and Kay Redfield Jamison, *Night Falls Fast: Understanding Suicide* (NY: Knopf, 1999).

E. Pastoral Care Following a Suicide

A church may also be called upon to provide pastoral care following a suicide. When preaching at a funeral following a suicide, pastors will preach from their particular theology on suicide and eternal security. However, there are certain pitfalls that should be avoided. Several recommendations are listed below.

In our interviews with pastors, we have noted a sometimes-unexpected issue with a focus on eternal security. For example, one evangelical pastor preached on the assurance of salvation at a funeral for a parishioner who died by suicide. Immediately following the funeral and in the following days “there was one person after the other who said, if that’s the case, then I’m ready to go now.” Eternal security may not be the preferred pastoral focus. The funeral service may be a time to share the person’s struggles with psychological and spiritual pain and to discuss alternatives and resources. One pastor also mentioned to us that when he is uncertain of a person’s Christian commitment, he focuses on helping his listeners consider their own finiteness and the choices before them, “a subtle kind of evangelism. We point to the hope that is available to us all.”

Some pastors may wonder how to go about this frank discussion. One way is to not be afraid to mention the word “suicide” if the family does not object. One pastor said that to omit a mention of suicide in a funeral is “to deny people the opportunity to process their own pain, anger, anguish.” Sometimes your mentioning “suicide” can lessen the stigma and allow for processing this loss. The illusion that suicide cannot happen to a Christian has been shattered with this suicide and the illusion needs to be addressed. One pastor also said this may be a chance to talk about Jesus’ own reaction to death which was weeping and to talk about God’s presence with us in our grief.

It is also important to avoid glamorizing suicide because some people can be vulnerable to “copycat” suicide. Acknowledge the person’s accomplishments and struggles but do not celebrate their choice of death or in a way that makes vulnerable others in the audience yearn for that kind of recognition in death. Keep an eye out for those who seem to be struggling most and share resources with them.

Avoid judgment. One of the issues that a church community may be struggling with is their judgment of suicide as failure. I heard of

one pastor who in his funeral sermon told the congregation outright to not judge the family whose loved one had died of suicide.

The church community may also be processing their own guilt for not having noticed the suicidal person's struggles or not having intervened. They are asking themselves, "What else could we have done?" One pastor we interviewed said it is important for a church community to understand that if they had known how serious the situation was, they would have intervened. Also, some suicidal people do not invite others into their pain. However, if there are instances of needing to forgive one's self, some parishioners may need to focus on God's mercy for sins of omission or commission. This may provide a church community the opportunity to care for others now that they are aware that Christians indeed struggle with suicidal thoughts. This guilt may also predispose some parishioners to leave the church and leave their "guilt" behind.

One more way to minister to those left behind is a non-judgmental ministry of presence or a ministry of space, giving space to grieve. It is important to not provide pat answers but to grieve with those left behind, with the knowledge that grieving a suicide may take longer and can be more intense than grieving other deaths. The apostle Paul tells us to "Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn" (Romans 12:15). It is important to allow the grieving person to go through this difficult process over a long stretch of time within their community. Faithfulness on the part of the church community is important. Remember the anniversaries as they come. You might even help the bereaved find a grief support group when they are ready.

Assume feelings of anger and betrayal following a suicide, which is a different kind of death. Suicide leaves behind a community, which may not have been invited to help or may be focused on its own sense of failure. Suicide also provides little closure. Many pastors talked to us about the importance of providing avenues for the church community to process together these feelings and their thoughts in an ongoing way in formal or informal groups.

Avoid doing this work alone. It is important for pastors to come apart for Sabbath rest especially following a suicide. As one pastor said, "How do you regroup ... when you engage a lot of suffering? And particularly when you don't feel like you're making much

progress against the suffering.” Some pastors described reaching out to colleagues at these times in addition to their continued practices of faith and self-care.

Summary

I have surveyed relevant views of eternal security and suicide. It is my hope that I have demonstrated that though one must develop a theology of suicide and eternal security, these views may be tempered by the complexities of pastoral practice in a community of believers.

Associations and Alliances

The Suicide Prevention Resource Center www.SPRC.org (See a brochure called *After a suicide: Recommendations for religious services and other public memorial observances.*)

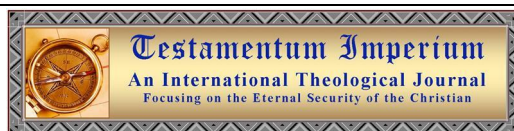
The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention www.AFSP.org (See their list of suicide bereavement support groups.)

The American Association of Suicidology www.Suicidology.org (See their list of relevant statistics.)

The National Alliance of the Mentally Ill www.NAMI.org (See a brochure called *Suicide: Taking Care of Yourself After an Attempt—Moving Ahead After Your Treatment in the Emergency Department.*)

The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (1-800-273-TALK) www.SuicidePreventionLifeline.org (See printable wallet cards on suicide prevention.)

The World Health Organization www.WHO.int (See world statistics on suicide and depression.)



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