

Suicide

*Understanding and
Preventing It*

BEYOND
TODAY
BIBLE STUDY AID



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he call came one night in late October of 2011. My wife handed me the receiver, and the voice on the other end identified himself as a deputy of the San Miguel County, Colorado, sheriff's department.

by Mike Kelley

He was calling to let me know they had found the pickup truck belonging to my younger brother Keith out on Uncompahgre Plateau—a lonely, remote, windswept upland in southwestern Colorado. At least now there would be a measure of closure. But those of us in the family were left to ponder why he made such a devastating choice. We were aware of the loneliness, the fears and, more than anything else, the depression that had tormented him since adolescence. But suicide?

He called me a few days before his disappearance to tell me he had made his decision. He was not going to end up, as he put it, “a lonely, scared, sick old man,” but would, he said, end it all at a time of his choosing, and in a way and place where we would never find his remains.

I guess I never really believed he would do it, although he had talked about it often during the times he felt down—the times he felt his life was spinning out of control. Looking back now, I wish I had understood suicide better and what drives a person to take his own life.

In the following months I studied the subject of suicide, and I want to share with you what I've learned. You might know of someone—a family member, friend or acquaintance—who's on the verge of doing the unthinkable. It's my hope that what I learned will help prevent this tragedy from happening to someone you know.

Suicide: a growing scourge

Tragically suicide is on the increase across the United States, claiming more than 42,000 lives in 2014 and making it a greater killer than motor vehicle accidents or homicides. Figures from the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention reveal that every 15 minutes suicide claims another life. It's the fourth leading cause of death for adults ages 18 to 65.

Particularly devastating to those 18 to 24, it is their third leading cause of death, and the second highest for college students. Since 1990, more young people have died of suicide than from AIDS, cancer, pneumonia, influenza, birth defects and heart disease combined.

Suicide among children is increasing at an alarming rate. The National Mental Health Association reports that suicide is the sixth leading cause of death among children ages 5 to 15. Between 1980 and 1996 the suicide rate among children 10 to 14 increased by more than 100 percent.

A 2004 survey of high school students showed that more than 24 percent had seriously considered suicide in the past year—up from 20 percent in 1997, according to a New York University study.

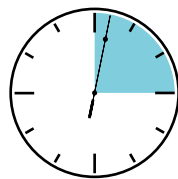
Suicide is a national tragedy, and it's getting worse. It's increasingly essential that we become informed on the causes and how to find help. Someday you may be in a position to help prevent a suicide. This knowledge may make the difference.

Depression: the big killer

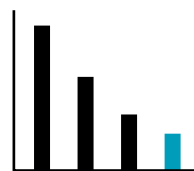
While the pressures of modern life have accelerated its frequency, suicide also took its toll in ancient times. The overwhelming urge to take one's own life has afflicted people of every nation, culture, religion and governmental system through the ages.

42k

lives taken were by suicide in 2014



suicide claims a life every 15 minutes



suicide is the fourth leading cause of death, for ages 18-65



nearly 1 in 4 high school students surveyed seriously considered suicide in the past year

Source: American Foundation for Suicide Prevention

As Kay Redfield Jamison puts it in her heralded study on suicide, *Night Falls Fast*: “No one knows who was the first to slash his throat with a piece of flint, take a handful of poison berries, or intentionally drop his spear to the ground in battle. Nor do we know who first jumped impulsively, or after thought, from a great cliff, walked without food into an ice storm, or stepped into the sea with no intention of coming back.”

However, while suicide can be the end result of financial reverse, romantic failure or the discovery of terminal illness, the majority of suicide deaths trace back to one major reason: deep, debilitating depression. By “depression” we mean serious, long-lasting despondency and feelings of hopelessness, not mere discouragement, sorrow or having the “blues” (although lengthy discouragement can sometimes deteriorate into serious depression).

Estimates are that one in ten Americans suffers from chronic depression. The rate is higher among women, and while men's depression rate had been thought to be less than half that of women, new estimates put it higher. The worst forms of clinical depression consume their victims, making them unable to face each new day.

Attitudes about depression keep many who suffer from ever seeking help. National Mental Health Association figures show that more than half of Americans think depression is a personal weakness, a sign of failure. Despite years of TV bombardment about depression remedies, four out of five suffering from depression do not seek treatment. The primary

reason? They are too embarrassed to seek help.

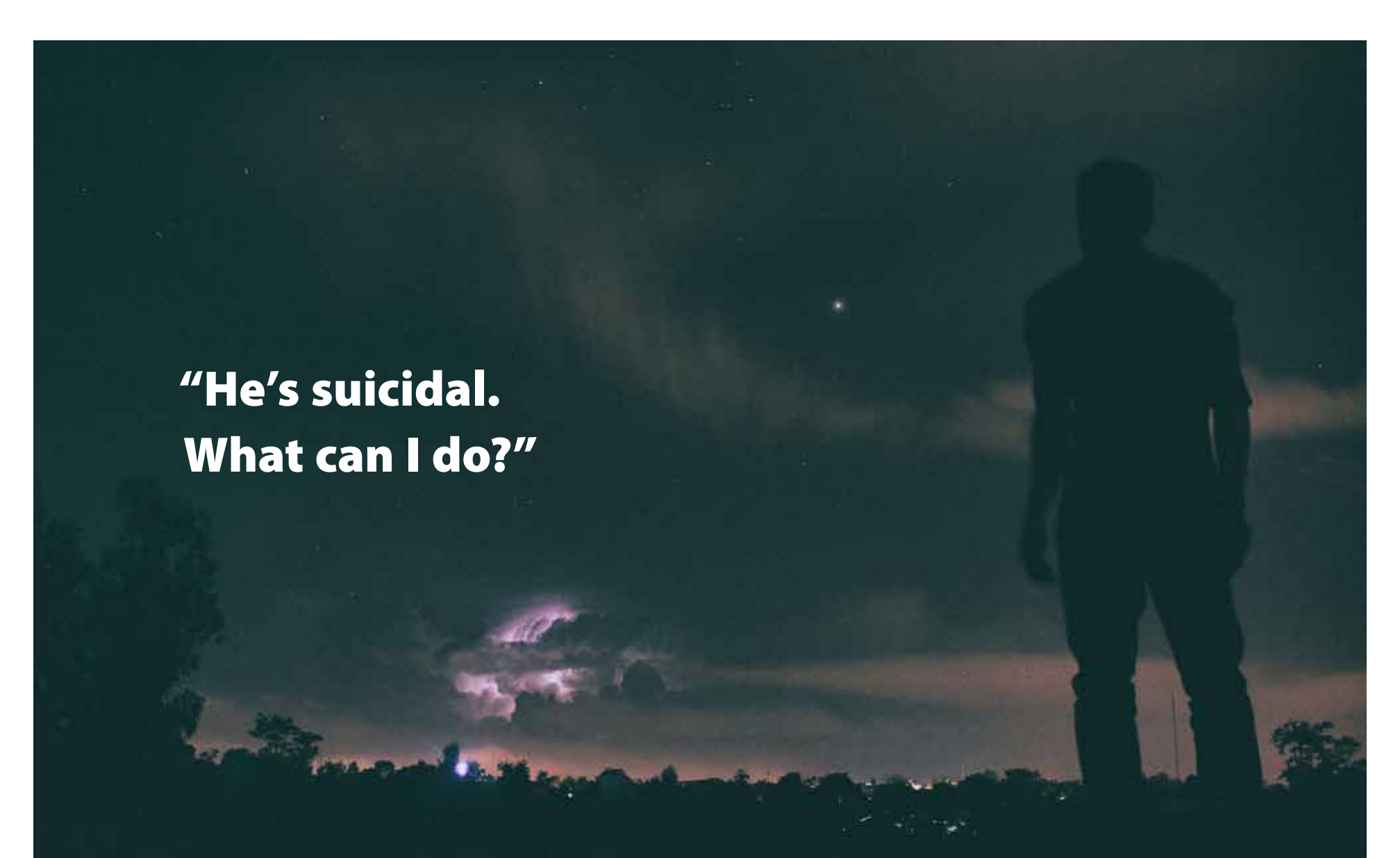
Concerns about masculinity and self-image keep most severely depressed men from seeking help. In his 2003 national bestseller *I Don't Want to Talk About It*, psychotherapist Terrance Real talks about what he terms “the cultural cover-up about depression in men”:

“One of the ironies about male depression is that the very forces that help create it keep us from seeing it. Men are not supposed to be vulnerable. Pain is something we are to rise above . . . We tend not to recognize depression in men because the disorder itself is seen to be unmanly.

“Depression carries, to many, a double stain—the stigma of mental illness and the stigma of ‘feminine’ emotionality” (p. 22). This stigma is especially prevalent among African-American men with severe depression. Tragically, only 8 percent ever seek help.

Depression claims victims from every social strata, every IQ and every religion. Fame and fortune are no antidotes for the urge to kill oneself, and famous suicides make a very long list. The sad fact is, many of society's more gifted artists, writers, scientists, athletes, politicians and businessmen have taken their own lives. Severe depression has pushed many others to the brink of suicide, although they backed away before going over the edge.

British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, one of the most famous and powerful national leaders of the 20th century, suffered from depression. His fits of depression could last for weeks, and to combat them he drove himself with his work, often denying his body needed rest and relaxation.



“He’s suicidal. What can I do?”

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hen suicide takes a family member or friend, the common reaction is to ask, “What could I have done?” Family members agonize, playing over and over in their minds their last few days and weeks with their loved one, wondering what they could have done differently.

As Jamison puts it: “Suicide is a death like no other, and those left behind to struggle with it must confront a pain like no other. They are left with the shock and the unending ‘what ifs’ . . . They are left to a bank of questions from others . . . mostly about

why? They are left to the silence of others who are horrified, embarrassed, or otherwise unable to cobble together a note of condolence, an embrace, or a comment; and they are left with the assumption . . . that more could have been done.”

GET HELP

(800) 273-8255

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

If you think someone is suicidal based on the way he or she is talking or acting, you need professional help to handle the situation. Get that help as quickly as possible. Involve other people. Call 911 or the suicide hotline.

Since the suicidal often refuse to seek help, mental health experts point out the crucial need for intervention on the part of family and friends. They have to watch for signs of suicidal behavior and seek help, such as mental health professionals and suicide prevention centers, on behalf of those tormented.

The good news is that nearly eight out of ten patients with depressive illness will improve through treatment with medicine and therapy, according to the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention. And if the patient is receptive to learning what the Bible has to say, he will likely experience significant help from learning what it truly teaches. In John 8:32, Jesus Christ said, “You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”

Knowledge is power, says Jamison, who recommends that family and friends of the suicidal educate themselves about clinical depression and its effects, the ways to treat depression and the courses of action to be taken.

If someone is threatening suicide, take steps to calm the individual and get trained suicide prevention experts involved as soon as possible. Two respected groups, the National Depressive and Manic-Depressive Association, a Chicago-based support group, and the Mayo Clinic, make the following recommendations:

- Take suicide threats seriously.
- Involve other people, especially if someone is threatening imminent suicide. Call 911 or the suicide hotline.
- If the person has sought professional help, contact his or her therapist, psychiatrist, crisis intervention team, or others who are already familiar with the case.
- Question the person about his or her suicidal thoughts. Be direct—ask if the person has a specific plan for suicide.
- Reassure the person that the problem can be helped. Remind him or her that help is available



and things will get better.

- Don't promise confidentiality, because you may need to speak to the person's doctor to protect him or her. Don't make promises that would endanger the person's life.
- Avoid leaving the person alone until you can be sure he or she is in the hands of competent professionals.

The goal is immediate intervention—actions to prevent an impending disaster. But a long-term objective is also important. Having a purpose in life is perhaps the strongest antidote to feelings of hopelessness and despondency. God has a purpose for every human life, and we'll discuss that in a moment. (To find out more about it, be

sure to read our study guide *Why Were You Born?*)

And this can't be overemphasized: If you think the person is suicidal based on the way he is talking or acting, you need professional help to handle the situation. Get that help as quickly as possible.

Realize also that this person may need hospitalization until the suicidal crisis has passed.

And the crisis may not be over just because the person shows some improvement.

Jamison advises a contingency planning meeting involving the suicidal person, family members or friends, and the therapist to decide on future courses of action should the person again become suicidal. Jamison advises parents of high school or college students who show signs of depression to discuss these matters openly and matter-of-factly. Parents should encourage their children to feel comfortable in discussing their depression or suicidal feelings and seeking help.

BIBLE STUDY AID

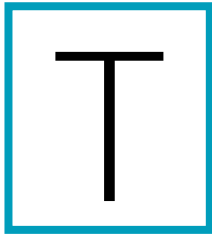


Why Were You Born?

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Are There Examples of Depression in the Bible?



he Bible relates examples of depression of various kinds. It shows that depression and related emotional problems can afflict both those who follow God and those who don't.

In the Old Testament, God allowed Satan to afflict the righteous Job with the loss of his family and virtually everything he owned, and then to attack his body with painful boils. (God allowed this for a long-ranged purpose.)

Job 3 shows this faithful man's deep depression and desire to die:

"May the day perish on which I was born, and the night in which it was said 'a male child is conceived.' May that day be darkness; may God above not seek it, nor the light shine upon it" (verses 3-4). Later, Job wished for death. "Why is light given to him who is in misery, and life to the bitter of the soul, who long for death, but it does not come, and search for it more than hidden treasures" (verses 20-21). Long-term suffering without hope drives many to despair and the desire to end it all.

In 1 Samuel 1 we see the story of Hannah, one of two wives of Elkanah. The other wife, Peninnah, had children, but Hannah was unable to conceive. Peninnah arrogantly ridiculed Hannah and "provoked her severely, to make her miserable" (verse 6). At those times, Hannah "wept and did

not eat" (verse 7).

Then one year when they had gone to worship at the tabernacle, "she was in bitterness of soul, and prayed to the LORD and wept in anguish" (verse 10). Hannah was indeed depressed. But the story has a very happy ending.

The book of 1 Samuel also records the sad reign of Saul, the first king of Israel. He started out well enough: tall, attractive, from a good family; it would seem he had everything going for him. But a series of bad decisions based on his pride and a wrong attitude took their toll, and before long Saul sank into the depths of depression.

Additionally, some of God's own prophets went through very low periods when they wished they were dead. Elijah is perhaps the best known. He carried God's judgments and warnings to several Israelite kings, including the despotic Ahab and his evil wife, Jezebel.

A high point of Elijah's life came when he overthrew the 450 prophets of Baal at Mt. Carmel (1 Kings 18.) He proved not only the power of God but the utter lack of power of the hundreds of pagan prophets. It seems Elijah should have been on top of the world,

but he soon sank into the depths of depression after being threatened by Jezebel.

"Then he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness and sat down under a broom tree. And he prayed that he might die, and said: 'It is enough! Now, LORD, take my life, for I am no better than my fathers'" (1 Kings 19:4).

Elijah was extremely tired physically and mentally, but he also needed to learn a lesson about God's power and presence.

The Bible records other examples. We know Jeremiah went through periods of great grief and probably some depression.

Jonah suffered frustration, resentment, and discouragement over God's decision not to destroy Nineveh (Jonah 4:8).

The apostle Paul experienced many types of great suffering, as he summarized in 2 Corinthians 11:23-26. However, the New Testament gives no evidence of Paul suffering any deep depression. Philippians 3:13-14 shows he knew the importance of "forgetting those things which are behind [because God's grace gives us a clean slate and you can't change the past] and reaching forward to those things which are ahead"—staying Christ-centered and focused on the goal of God's Kingdom.

Depression can also affect godly people. Many of God's servants went through low periods in their lives and sometimes suffered from depression and a desire to die.

Paul's epistles are filled with uplifting encouragement for others. Such encouragement can be found in Romans 8:18 and verse 28, and 2 Corinthians 4, where he spoke of "our light affliction, which is but for a moment" (verse 17). These verses have given great comfort, encouragement and inspiration to countless people over the ages. Paul's example shows that depression comes not so much from what happens to us as from our perspective and attitudes about those happenings.

The point is that depression can also affect godly people. It's not necessarily a character flaw or a sin that brings on depression, although these can be factors. Many of God's servants went through low periods in their lives and sometimes suffered from depression and a desire to die. However, though they may have wanted God to end their lives, the Bible records no cases of them taking their own lives.

If we are depressed, we we must not let embarrassment hold us back from seeking help when we are depressed. In the next section, we consider the question: What does the Bible reveal about how God views suicide?

Are Those Who Commit Suicide Forever Condemned?



The Bible relates examples of depression of various kinds. It shows that depression and related emotional problems can afflict both those who follow God and those who don't.

The Sixth Commandment says “You shall not murder.” This, of course, includes the murder of oneself. God alone gives life, and it is His alone to take. While we sympathize with those who are hurting and despondent, no scripture in the Bible condones suicide.

While there can be no doubt that taking one's life is wrong, suicide is often a complex matter. Perhaps others are quick to judge and condemn people who take their own lives. But we should avoid the tendency to oversimplify this tragic type of death. Individuals who commit suicide often have been struggling with serious problems, such as depression, alcoholism or other forms of drug abuse. Taking one's life isn't the right way to deal with any trial, but the people who do are not thinking clearly.

Some wonder if the victims of suicide will be consigned to hellfire, to continue on in an agony worse than what they suffered in life. Will this happen? Would that be the action of a loving, merciful God?

The Bible reveals that the dead are just that—dead. They neither go consciously to heaven at death nor suffer torment in a burning hell. At death, there are no more thoughts. “For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing” (Ecclesiastes

9:5; compare verse 10). Because the dead have no consciousness, the Bible frequently compares death with sleep (John 11:11-14). That is wonderfully comforting because God's Word teaches that the dead will one day wake up! Many people have wondered about what exists on “the other side,” and if you're one of them, read our free study guide *What Happens After Death?*

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What Happens After Death?

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The reality is that severe depression, often compounded by other problems and disappointments, can drive a person to suicide. The mental agony that accompanies clinical depression, or a bout of unending discouragement, can make suicide seem attractive because the sufferer expects his suffering to end at death. But this is not the answer, for it is not the end of the story. Those who die will live again.

The Bible reveals that all (including suicide victims) who never were converted to Christ's way of life will still have their opportunity for salvation.

God is the God of justice and great mercy. He “desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:4). Those who aren’t in the first resurrection to eternal life will be resurrected in the second resurrection to a physical life, so they can learn God’s truth and have their opportunity for eternal life (Revelation 20:5; see also verses 11-13).

For more on all this, be sure to read “Suicide: Escape, Road to Hell or Neither?” below.

Suicide is not the final end of a person’s life. Those who choose to end

their lives will live again. This will be after Jesus Christ has returned to earth and is ruling the world!

Everyone will have the opportunity to repent and receive Christ’s healing of their minds and hearts. He is the One who “heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds” (Psalms 147:3). Knowing this should be very comforting to the loved ones of a person who has died in such a manner.

Every person will have the opportunity to live a peaceful and happy physical life, free of mental pain, as each one prepares for eternal life with God as

Jesus Christ is the One who “heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds” (Psalms 147:3).

part of His family!

And finally, when new heavens and a new earth are established, “God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying . . . There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away” (Revelation 21:1, 4).

Let us all look forward to that time of awesome healing and restoration.

For those who are suffering now, whether in depression and contemplating suicide or coping with the loss of a loved

one to this horrible tragedy, there is light up ahead—the brightest day ever is coming. And the light of God can be found even today.

There is a way out of the dark right now—a way of hope and healing. May we all follow what God tells us in Jeremiah 29:13: “You will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart.”

Suicide: Escape, Road to Hell or Neither?

Whenever a person, young or old, takes his or her life, it is such a tragedy. A void is left in the lives of those who knew and loved the person. And we know that the families and friends of people who “succeed” in committing suicide often suffer terribly, as they live with the loss and struggle to understand why their loved one died in this way. Questions remain about whether more could have been done to help pull a person back from the brink of self destruction. The survivors need a great deal of understanding and comfort as well.

And what of those who commit suicide? Have they really escaped their problems? Or are they damned to an eternity in hell? This is a major question among Christians dealing with this tragic subject. The real

question is whether or not people’s suffering continues after death in an ever-burning hell. The answer is no. They are no longer suffering, and they are not damned for eternity.

Scripture shows that at death one’s thoughts end and there is no conscious awareness: “Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might; for there is no work or device or knowledge or wisdom in the grave where you are going” (Ecclesiastes 9:10).

The mental agony that leads a person to commit suicide ceases while a person is dead. God, in His mercy, designed life so that at death the physical mind does not function. The hopes and dreams and fears of life end. So the suffering that leads one to take his life also ceases.

But suicide is not an escape or quick solution to one’s problems. When resurrected those who’ve taken their own lives will still likely have psychological issues to work out. They will still have to deal with their problems, and now with the addition of having to face up to a terrible wrong, the murder of self and the torment inflicted on others by that.

Thankfully, God’s desire is for them to turn to Him and be saved. But the things people do in this life will still have consequences in the sense of having to come to terms with them. This could be quite hard, so no one should think of suicide as some kind of golden ticket to the good life of the future. It is not.

Nevertheless, suicide victims are not eternally damned. They will live again in a better world with a revived opportunity for happiness and success.


Revelation 20:4-5 tells us that after

the resurrection of the faithful followers of Jesus Christ at His return, “the rest of the dead” will be resurrected a thousand years later. Those who never had opportunity for salvation will at last have it. Jesus Christ came to heal the brokenhearted (Luke 4:18), but this was not fulfilled completely at His first coming. It will be fulfilled at His second coming.


God the Father, we are told, judges from the Mercy Seat. He dearly desires that all people who have lived, or will live, be in His family. Jesus Christ knows our frailty and therefore is our advocate at the right hand of our Father who is sitting on that throne of mercy. This includes all those who have suffered personally and taken their own lives.

The Father and Jesus Christ have not forgotten anyone. The brokenhearted, including those who committed suicide or even contemplated it, will ultimately be healed.

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