

SUICIDE AND THE BIBLE, by Roland Halpern – May 2005

Today's presentation originally began as part of a debate on assisted dying between a Right to Life organization and myself that was sponsored by the Methodist Church. Although you obviously will hear only one side of the debate today, my opponent's point of view was straight forward – "Thou shall not kill", "Life is a gift from God and we are simply stewards of our bodies but do not own them", "We should not damage what is not ours to begin with."

Now the practice of assisting another person to die has been going on for centuries, but it is still as controversial today as it was in Biblical times. As a proponent of assisted dying, provided it is the measure of last resort when all other reasonable options have failed, I am pleased to be here to talk to you about the common misconception that suicide, which I would argue also includes assisted suicide, is forbidden in the Bible.

My purpose today is not to interpret the Bible, but instead examine it from a historical perspective as respects the issues of killing and suicide, two distinctly different actions that are often confused.

Let us start with the "sanctity of life" argument, often used in various forms, but invariably in connection with Exodus 20:13 and the Sixth Commandment "Thou shall not kill", which most scholars now acknowledge is more accurately translated as "Thou shall not murder", an act referring to the taking of another's life and not one's own.

Curiously, the same Book of Exodus that gives us this rather straightforward directive almost immediately begins introducing exceptions that allow, if not require, that we kill. For example one chapter later in Exodus 21.17 we find that "he that curseth his father, or his mother, shall surely be put to death"⁽¹⁾. Were all parents to follow this Commandment, I would probably be addressing a significantly smaller audience here today.

Other Books, including Deuteronomy and Leviticus, offer more of these exceptions, such as instructions to stone a stubborn or rebellious son to death ⁽²⁾ and most of us are familiar with chapter 3 of Ecclesiastes that tells us that "To everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven" including a time to be born and a time to die, as well as "a time to kill".

And while the 137th Psalm is not as direct, it is nonetheless intensely disturbing in its vengeful edict "Happy shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock!"

The New Testament understandably mirrors many of these exceptions, while adding a few new ones. Romans 13:1-7 ⁽³⁾, for example, tells us that the government authorities are servants of God who can execute God's wrath upon wrongdoers, and is often cited as the Biblical justification for capital punishment.

Thus it appears the Commandment “Thou shall not kill” is far from absolute regarding killing, and I would argue that Biblical killing or murder has nothing to do with the intentional taking of one’s own life, which now brings us to the topic of “suicide”.

According the Merriam Webster Dictionary, suicide is defined as:

I a: the act or an instance of taking one’s own life voluntarily and intentionally especially by a person of years of discretion and of sound mind.

But discretion and sound mind are not the words most people would use to describe suicide today. And how could it be when we are constantly exposed to acts to passion and desperation including suicide bombers, failed love affairs, those suffering from severe depression, and corporate executives mired in scandal.

However, from the suicide notes that are sometimes found we know that the decision of a terminally ill person to take his or her own life is often well thought through, and leaves little room for doubt as to the person’s state of mind. I refer to these as “rational” suicides.

In perhaps one of the most beautiful and rational suicide note ever written, Charlotte Perkins Gilman says:

“A last duty. Human life consists in mutual service. No grief, no pain, misfortune or ‘broken heart’ is excuse for cutting off one’s life while any power of service remains. But when all usefulness is over, when one is assured of an immanent and unavoidable death, it is the simplest of human rights to choose a quick and easy death in place of a slow and horrible one. Public opinion is changing on the subject. The time is approaching when we shall consider it abhorrent to our civilization to allow a human to lie in prolonged agony, which we should mercifully end in any other creature. Believing this choice to be of social service in promoting wider views on this question, I have preferred chloroform to cancer”.

That was in 1935. More recently in 2002, was the case of Admiral Chester Nimitz who, along with his wife Joan, committed suicide following the rapid deterioration of their health. The two had openly discussed suicide as an option of last resort with their families for at least ten years. They said they wanted to be in control at life’s end and not, as Chester Nimitz put it, at the mercy of some “whippersnapper internist”.

The note they left indicated that they had given considerable thought to their decision, that they were not suffering from depression or other type of mental illness, and that they had made a rational decision to take their lives because increasing health problems left them with no quality of life at all. They delayed their death until the New Year so that they could write out tax-exempt gifts to their children, and left thorough and detailed instructions as to how their affairs were to be settled.

These were not the spontaneous acts of desperation or disguised cries for help that opponents of assisted dying often claim are the real motivates behind suicide.

You may be surprised to learn that suicide is not against the law in any state, nor is it prohibited in most of the industrialized nations. However, assisting in a suicide is currently illegal in every state except Oregon, and then only when a physician has followed a rigorous set of safeguards and controls designed to prevent abuse. I will touch briefly on these safeguards later.

If suicide is not illegal, then why do we view it so negatively? For one thing, because there are too many suicides for all the wrong reasons, reasons that are usually temporary and correctable such as depression, stress, abuse, loss of a job, loss of a loved one, and the list goes on.

As mentioned earlier the Commandment “Thou shall not kill” is often used in support of opposing suicide, yet there is nothing in the Bible that forbids it. In fact at least six suicides are documented in the Old Testament (4), none of which resulted in retribution, divine or otherwise.

Consider Samson, who not only took his own life when he demolished the temple at Sorek, but those of more than 3,000 Philistines as well. Yet we are taught Samson was a hero, as was King Saul who threw himself upon his own sword to avoid capture, and was immediately followed by his armor bearer, who did the same.

And then there was Abimelech. Mortally wounded after a “certain woman” threw a millstone upon his head, as he lay dying he demanded of his armor-bearer “draw your sword and kill me, least men say of me ‘a woman killed him’. Far from being punished for this deed, Abimelech was apparently rewarded. “Thus”, the Bible tells us, “God requited the crime of Abimelech, which he had committed against his father in killing his seventy brothers.”

In the New Testament, Judas’ act of hanging himself is often viewed as an appropriate display of remorse for betraying Jesus (5), but nowhere is the act itself condemned.

Historically the denunciation of suicide as being against the laws of God did not officially enter the Christian theology until around the Fifth Century AD.

In fact we find that before that time the strongest pull towards suicide originated within the Christian Church itself owing its celebration of those who suffered, and accepted or willingly embraced a violent and painful death at the hands of persecutors.

Refusal to denounce the faith resulted in certain death, whether it be by the sword, by the claws and fangs of fearsome beasts, or just about any other manner of torture the faithful were willing to endure.

It was the promise of an everlasting and carefree afterlife that caused many believers to seek out eternity as soon as possible. The idea of dying for the cause held a great deal of appeal for the growing Christian religion, especially if there was a lot of suffering involved. Shot by arrows, burned alive, eviscerated, drawn and quartered, this may not have been Shakespeare's "such stuff as dreams are made of" but what were a few hours of agony for an infinity of pleasure.

Chastity was also highly prized and therefore a virtuous woman who intentionally took her own life to prevent defilement was venerated, not scorned. More than a few such women were elevated to Sainthood status as a result.

St. Pelagia was one of them. Although there was no evidence her capturers intended to defile her when they sought to bring her before a judge to face charges for her militant beliefs, she decided not to risk her virginity and jumped from the roof to her death. In trying to explain why such an act is justifiable and not a sin one Biblical scholar, Father Davis, said "she merely wished the jump and put up with the fall".

Similarly, St. Apollonia, about to be attacked by a pagan mob, leapt into a fire knowing full well she would perish. But was her intent to end her life or merely wish the leap and put up with the fire?

More recently on September 11, 2001, over 200 people leapt to their deaths from the top of the World Trade Center in New York City. Had they remained behind they would certainly have been burned to death. Facing imminent death they made a choice over the manner of that death.

From a religious perspective can we argue that had they stayed on the roof and burned they were assured a place in Heaven, but because they jumped, thus committing suicide, they instead will go to Hell? Or can we excuse their act as merely wishing the jump and putting up with the fall?

This philosophy, originally an invention of the Catholic Church, is often referred to as the "double effect". Simply put this doctrine states that it is permissible to perform an act that results in harm, even when one can foresee the harm, provided the original intent was not the harm itself.

So, for example, it is OK to wage war even though we know others may be killed because the intent is not to kill others but to stop the oppressors. The double effect has been used in medicine for years where high doses of pain medication may be administered to alleviate pain knowing full well that in so doing the patient will ultimately die as a result.

But I am getting ahead of myself. Returning to early Christian times, in Northern Africa the newly formed Christian sect of Circumcellions held the passionate belief in the obligation to openly resist persecution, which often included goading and even forcing the authorities into killing them. To die a "martyr" ensured a place in Heaven.

Members of this lively sect would show up at Pagan festivals to offer themselves as human sacrifices, often announcing their intentions well in advance so they would be treated royally and fattened for the slaughter.

The Roman edict forbidding Christian churches or its scriptures gave the Circumcellions yet another avenue for bringing about their own deaths. Claiming to possess copies of the “now” forbidden scriptures, they are arrested and then put to death when they failed to surrender documents that they very often never had to begin with.

The Circumcellions also engaged in a practice referred to as “self-precipitation”, essentially mass suicides where the devout jumped to their deaths shortly after absolution thus entering Heaven free of sin.

St. Augustine, alarmed that if these practices continued the future growth of the Christian faith would be in jeopardy, declared such acts heresy. Unfortunately his edict came a bit too late for the Circumcellions who literally had died out.

Augustine’s beliefs opposing suicide became incorporated into the various law and catechisms of the Catholic Church and thus while suicide officially became a sin in the eyes of the Church there is nothing condemning the practice in the Bible.

The Book of Ecclesiasticus, often called the Book of Sirach, is believed to have been written between 190 and 170 B.C., long before the rise of Christianity. The “book” included in the King James, New English and New American Bibles contains the following versus:

“14. When he (God) made man in the beginning, he left him free to take his own decisions; 15 if you choose, you can keep the commandments; whether or not you keep faith is yours to decide. 16 He has set before you fire and water; reach out and take which you choose; 17 before man lie life and death, and whichever he prefers is his (6).

In speaking about relinquishing his own life for the cause one notable Biblical figure stated “No man taketh it (life) from me, but I lay it down myself.” Could these words of Jesus be construed as his embracing suicide?

Notwithstanding the Augustinian prohibitions, from time to time, suicide was still considered acceptable under certain circumstances, for example killing of oneself rather than denounce the faith, in self defense, or as proper atonement for committing incest, and it continued to be acceptable as a means of preserving chastity until the Church decided that chastity was a state of mind, and not a physical condition.

Outside of the Bible, we remember that the good Captain was expected to go down with his ship, and the idea of mercy killing in battle, the “coup de grace”, was an accepted and humane approach to dispatching a mortally wounded soldier who would otherwise suffer in pain or be captured and humiliated or tortured by the enemy.

Mercy killings were not unheard of off the battlefield either. In 17th Century Brittany a common practice involved the use of the “Holy Hammer”, a religious object carefully guarded and kept hidden in the church until needed. When someone was dying and in pain upon cleansing the person’s soul the local priest would summon the eldest male member of the family, instructing him to bring down the hammer on the sufferer’s skull.

Although not technically suicide, dueling was one a fashionable means of defending one’s honor, and to refuse a challenge was an act of cowardice. The parties entering a duel did so with the premeditated intent to injure, if not outright kill their opponent, while at the same time willingly exposing themselves to possible injury or death. Such acts were seldom condemned as violating any law or Commandment.

And of a somewhat different genre there is Captain Oates, a member of Admiral Scott’s Antarctic exploration party. Suffering from gangrene and frostbite, after telling his comrades “I am just going outside and may be some time”, walked into a blizzard to die rather than further imperil the group. His action was viewed as altruistic and heroic yet there was no question he, as well as everyone in the party, knew he was ending his own life.

Putting the “Thou shall not kill” argument aside for the moment we are still left with the argument of “Playing God”, one that goes something like this: “Only God can give or take life and therefore a doctor should not play God by intentionally hastening someone’s death.”

By physicians by their very nature have been “playing God” ever since they began practicing their art. Consider the following:

Antibiotics are prescribed to kill life-threatening infections.

Cardiopulmonary resuscitation is used to start a stopped heart on a daily if not hourly basis.

Organs are often harvested from severely brain damaged donors for transplantation. Once harvested, the donor’s life support is discontinued causing death.

Artificial respirators are routinely used to keep a person breathing.

Pacemakers are inserted so that a failing heart will keep beating.

In each of the above examples, absent the intervention of a physician the patient arguably would not have survived. Therefore is it playing God to keep an otherwise dying patient alive, or in some cases even bring them back from the dead?

And lest we forget, what about the doctor’s “pulling the plug” where there is no longer any reasonable hope of recovery, with the full knowledge the patient will die as a result?

One such example involves Mark Person, a quadriplegic from Idaho, who in 2003 decided he no longer wanted to be connected to the ventilator needed to keep him alive. At his request his doctors heavily sedated him and then turned off his life support.

Person's case is not unique. Such events happen regularly, and when they do the physician is neither accused of playing God, committing murder, or even assisting in a hastened death, despite the fact the patient died as a direct result of the action.

So, why should helping a terminally ill patient to end his or her suffering be viewed any differently?

As I mentioned earlier, committing suicide is not illegal. Many of my opponents acknowledge this but argue, "Fine, if someone wants to kill themselves let them do it, but why involve a physician?" "Remember the Hippocratic Oath states "I will give no deadly medicine to anyone if asked, nor suggest any such counsel."

In his book "The Hippocratic Oath and the Ethics of Medicine" (7), Dr. Steve H. Miles examines the Oath from a historical perspective looking into the actual events were taking place in Greece at the time. He is of the opinion that the admonishment to "give no deadly drug" has little to do with physician assisted dying and everything to do with keeping physicians from using their positions of trust to gain access to those in power for the purpose of poisoning them.

Miles notes that at the time the Oath was written there was "turmoil after the defeat of Athens by Sparta" and murder was frequently the means that "eliminated kings, successors, competitors and municipal figures." Historically, physicians were "bound by oath to assist their city-states" and "They were personally connected to military or civil leaders or wealthy patrons." Thus they were often given orders to kill, in much the same manner as ordinary soldiers. The fear of the "physician-poisoner" became so great that Plato himself declared their deeds as acts of terrorism.

The Oath, written over 2,500 years ago, is just as outdated as the Hamurabi codex that metered out justice with "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth". That law was abandoned long ago, and it is now time for the Hippocratic Oath to be dissolved.

In fact most medical schools have done just that, either revamping the Oath or creating their own, unique one, often omitting references to "deadly medicines" and other original prohibitions. The Yale School of Medicine oath for example stated "*I will respect the moral rights of patients to participate fully in the medical decisions that affect them. I will assist my patients to make choices that coincide with their own values and beliefs.*"

The American Medical Students Association, the American Women's Medical Association and Physicians for Human Rights have endorsed Physician assisted dying as an accepted measure of last resort when all reasonable efforts to relieve the patient's pain and suffering have failed. Thus Charlotte Perkins Gilman's predictions that "the time is approaching" is being fulfilled.

But getting back to the question, “Why involve a doctor?”

Let me answer that question with a question. How would you do it? If you were terminally ill, suffering, possibly bedridden, perhaps confined in a healthcare facility or hospital, how would you end your life?

Experience has shown us that many faced with this situation attempt to pull out the tubes and wires keeping them alive, starve themselves, or jump from a window if they are strong enough to climb the sill. Some even shoot themselves rather than going to the hospital.

Wouldn't it be more humane if a doctor could write a prescription for a medication that allowed you, if you so choose, to take the medication and then lapse into unconsciousness and die peacefully?

Before you come to end of today's presentation I would like to briefly mention Oregon's Death with Dignity Act, which has been in effect for over seven years. The Act allows a competent and terminally ill adult the legal right to ask a physician to prescribe a lethal dose of medication that the patient can then self-administer to bring an end to suffering.

While opponents label it a euthanasia law the Act does not permit active euthanasia, lethal injection, or mercy killing, all of which are specifically prohibited under the law.

The Oregon law applies to competent terminally ill adults who can self-administer the drug. If the patient is unresponsive, in a coma, or otherwise unable to voluntarily self-administer the medication, the law does not apply, and it would be a felony for anyone else to intercede on that patient's behalf.

The patient making the request to hasten death must be competent, an adult, and a resident of that state. Two oral requests for assistance must be made, separated by a minimum 15-day waiting period between requests.

A second physician must concur with the primary physician's terminal diagnosis, and should either physician have doubts as to the patient's mental capacity they must refer the patient for a psychological evaluation.

In addition, the physician is required by law to notify the patient of other alternatives, including palliative care, hospice, pain management and even spiritual counseling.

When all these conditions, and others, have been met, the patient must make a third written request, witnessed by two parties at least one of whom can have no known interest in the patient's death.

Again, only the patient him or herself can self-administer the medication. By law no one else is allowed to help. Therefore, the physician's “assistance” is essentially limited to

making the terminal diagnosis, assuring the safeguards have been met, and then writing the prescription.

A patient is never under an obligation to take the medication, and can change his or her mind at any time. Similarly, physicians are under no obligation to comply with a patient's request if personally opposed for moral, religious, philosophical, or ethical reasons.

In Oregon, physician-assisted dying has been legal for over seven years. Approximately 30 people end their lives in this way each year. Statistically that is less than one tenth of one percent of all deaths in that state. By and large they are elderly and suffering from irreversible cancers. Those who are not elderly are usually in the final stages of AIDS, ALS, known as Lou Gerhig's Disease, or have advanced cardiopulmonary disorders.

Paradoxically, when a physician is willing to assist a terminal patient the result may be a longer life, and a natural death. Through objective evaluation and counseling on alternative treatments or therapies many patients decide to "get on living" knowing that if all else fails there is still an option.

One study found that 90% of patients initially interested in hastening death changed their minds after having the opportunity to talk to a physician about their end of life concerns and after the physician was able to explain alternate forms of treatment. For many simply knowing that an option exists should all else fail, gives them the courage to explore alternate treatments.

If indeed life is a gift shouldn't we, as mortals, be able to use it as we see fit? Remember the Book of Sirach: "before man lie life and death, and whichever he prefers is his." After all, as one terminally patient told me, "When you give a gift you don't expect that it is going to be returned; that would be a loan."

I believe we all have been given the gift of self-determination. Some of us use it wisely, far too many of us don't, but it is still ours to use nonetheless.

If a competent adult is terminally ill, in pain or suffering, then that person, and not the church or government, should have the legal right to hasten his or her own death. Mercy, compassion and respect for human dignity demand it.

In the words of the stoic Seneca, "Whereas a prolonged life is not necessarily better, a prolonged death is necessarily worse."

- (1) Exodus 21 – 12: Strikes a man and man dies; 15: Strikes father or mother, 16: Steals a man; 17: Curses at father or mother
- (2) Deuteronomy 21:18
- (3) “if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain; he is the servant of God to execute his wrath upon the wrongdoer”
- (4) **Abimelech** (Judges 9:54), dying of a skull fracture during a siege, ordered his armor-bearer to slay him, to avoid the ignominy of having been seen to have been killed by a woman (she threw a millstone on him). **Samson** (Judges 16:26-31) killed himself to avoid being “made sport of” by the Philistines, after his capture and infamous haircut, taking his tormentors with him. Samson’s act of Faith earned him a place among the saints of Christianity (Hebrews, 11:32). **Saul** (1 Samuel 31: 3-6), wounded and defeated in battle with the Philistines, asked his armor-bearer to kill him. When the aide was afraid to do so, Saul fell upon his own sword. His armor-bearer then did likewise. **Achitophel** (or Ahitophel, var. spellings) (2 Samuel 17:1, 23), plotted to overthrow David. When his plan failed, he put his household in order and hanged himself. It is interesting to note that the account specifies that he was buried in his father’s sepulcher, in contrast to later Christian teachings of refusal to a burial in hallowed ground for suicides. **Zimri** (1 Kings 16:18), the original “King for Day”, usurped the throne of Israel; when he failed, he burned down the palace around himself.
- (5) **Jesus of Nazareth** (all four Gospels) chose to aggravate the authorities into crucifying him. Jesus was explicit in stating that his life was not being taken but that he was voluntarily choosing death: “No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself.” (John 10:18). While many Christians would vehemently deny that this amounts to suicide, Jesus’ actions in behaving in a way that he knew would cause the authorities to condemn and execute him, and his refusal to take any action to avoid his execution, is similar to what today would be called “suicide by cop”, and even more closely parallels the execution/suicide of Socrates, and the self-imposed martyrdoms carried out by members of the heretical Donatist schism and condemned by St. Augustine (see below).
Judas Iscariot (Matthews 27: 4-5) hung himself after betraying Jesus. Generally presented as an appropriate act of remorse.
The Jailer at Philippi (Acts 16:26-29), under the mistaken impression that all his prisoners had escaped during an earthquake, thought that his career and life were in jeopardy and prepared to fall on his sword. Paul stopped him, not arguing that suicide was wrong, but merely that the jailer was acting under a misapprehension.
- (6) King James Version – The Book of Ecclesiasticus, When God, in the beginning, created man, he made him subject to his own free choice. Before man are life and death, whichever he chooses shall be given him.
- (7) Miles, Steven H., The Hippocratic Oath and the Ethics of Medicine, Oxford University Press 2004.