
Suicide and the Christian Worldview¹

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Introduction

“Not to be fortified with good ideas is to be victimized by bad ones.” These words, written by evangelical theologian Carl F. H. Henry, describe the chaos and collapse of contemporary society. His words are as true of individuals as they are of cultures. Whether espoused or realized in private or in public, ideas have consequences. Good ones have good consequences, bad ones have bad consequences. Truth begets truth and error begets error. One such bad idea, prevalent in our day, is suicide in all its forms (self-murder, euthanasia, physician-assisted). The personal choice an individual makes to terminate life is being encouraged by “right to die” proponents in philosophical, medical, and legal arenas, then fortified by the courts and finally sent to the people in euphemistic terms for acceptance. Like a ripple that comes from a stone thrown upon still waters, the tolerance and acceptance of suicide is gradually widening and its noose is around the throat of an entire culture.

Though there are many avenues we must take to counter the rippling effect caused by suicide proponents (legal, medical, philosophical, biblical, and theological arguments), the primary front we must establish is personal. What do I know and believe about the issue? What is my position and why do I hold it? Am I vulnerable to the intellectual and emotional pressures that those who consider suicide confront, or am I somehow shielded from those pressures? What is my worldview and can I, or will I, always be consistent with it?

Present training in suicide prevention expends much of its energy on statistics and signs that trainees need to assimilate in order to identify potential victims of suicide: e.g. changes in behavior, health, job, and relationships. Not only have we failed to realize that this training is presented to potential victims and that they have, over the years, mastered the ability to shade their struggles from those attempting to identify them; we have also failed to adequately understand the process that leads to suicidal gesturing, ideation, and ultimate execution. We have been unintentionally lured into believing that suicide is an act *someone else* would consider or accomplish. The focus is external rather than internal, impersonal rather than personal. The truth of the matter is that human nature’s inclination toward self-preservation has been corrupted by the fall of our original parents; under certain and varied circumstances this nature of ours can be tempted to opt for physical, intellectual and emotional peace at the expense of life itself.

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Whether we are speaking of self-execution in our formidable years or assisted suicide because of the ravages of disease or during our end of life struggles, it is essential that each of us, who bear the image God, realize our own vulnerability to suicide when the pressures of persistent physical, intellectual, emotional and, yes, even spiritual weakness mount and threaten us. In our book, *Suicide: A Christian Response*, the contributors tell of a seminary professor, a mentor, a husband, a mother, a father, and a friend who *unexpectedly* ended their own lives violently—the only outward sign of their distress was that of their lifeless bodies, shocking testimonies from bearers of God’s image whose unresolved and mounting issues found no other final earthly solution to what, in reality, were resolvable issues.

As pastors, teachers, and students of the gospel message, we would do well to take the warning of the Apostle Peter seriously, “Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. But resist him, firm in your faith” (1 Pet. 5:8–9a). We may struggle with the adversary’s destructive efforts against the family we love and desire to protect, or toward the church we serve; or sense his irritating interference in the development of a school or in a course we want to teach; or shrink beneath the waves of doubt that question our abilities to serve or study effectively; or too often stand on the precipice of financial and occupational stability.

Therefore, each of us must keep vigil over our personal lives to ensure that the normal chaos associated with our profession is consistently and regularly resolved. Normal chaotic events that go unresolved gradually mount one upon the other thus producing abnormal and potentially lethal responses. In fact, sometimes difficulties come so rapidly or require such long-term attention, that immediate or timely resolve is impossible. In these circumstances, we can become mentally and emotionally burdened, and therefore vulnerable to self-diminishing and destructive thoughts that under normal circumstances would never cross our minds. In a sense, we are exactly where our adversary wants us and where our sinful disposition must not remain. The struggle against suicide in our society must begin with the safeguarding of our own soul. Let us give you a brief description of how this downward spiral constructs itself toward self-destruction.

Along with the normal exercise of your duties, this past year has also had an unusual assortment of challenging moments. You came upon an accident on the road that demanded your participation in CPR and your help in the extraction of the victims from the vehicle. Smells from the event and the reminder of the fragility of life stay with you. Before this incident is settled or worked through intellectually and emotionally, you discover your church board is frustrated with a stand you have taken to protect an individual in the church of whom the board is accusing of ethical misconduct. They haven’t said they want to dismiss you, but their aggravation is obvious and there are rumors starting.

A few months later a tragedy strikes that kills three members of your worship team in a car accident on their way home from practice. The family members request that you accompany them to the morgue; their extreme discomfort with the situation brings you into the room where identification of the bodies is to take place. Seeing the lifeless forms of these young people and comforting their family members is excruciating. It reminds you of an event six months earlier that brought you into the home of a church member whose wife suffocated when a seizure turned her face down on her bed. As the mortician and his assistant were bringing her down the stairs, you noticed them struggling with the body. As you moved up the stairs, their struggle became so obvious that you knew your help was no longer an option.

You grabbed her around the legs, your skin touching her skin beneath the blanket that covered her. She was cold; it was the first time you actually felt lifelessness. As you looked up at the mortician, you noticed her hand as it fell outside the blanket: very white with freshly manicured red nails. It was obvious that rigor mortis had set in. That funeral was tough enough; what would you have to do now to prepare for the funerals of three young people? You are the pastor, you have to do it and you do. Personal issues are set aside as you care for the loss experience of others. A few months after the funeral, you get a call from the chairman of the board. They want to see you. By the way, did we mention that you also have two teenage daughters and your wife is working part time to help make ends meet. So many issues and so little time to resolve the normal concerns of every day pastoral life, much less the convergence of crisis upon crisis.

Have you ever experienced so much pressure that your bowels bled, your stomach was in such knots that vomiting was a relief, your sleep was non-existent or if you did sleep, it was shallow and consisted of senseless dreams as you turned from side to side unable to feel any comfort? After a while, you check to see if your life insurance policy might pay more than your yearly income. You reason, “At least it will give them a start.” Then one day you drive home from taking your children to school. You pull into the garage, shut the garage door and sit in the darkness. You shut the car off, but leave your hand on the key in the ignition and you place your head on the steering wheel. You hurt so badly. Your breathing seems labored. You’re tired! You give and give to others, and yet, suffer so much for your efforts. You want to be left alone, but you realize that pastors can’t be very effective if they go into isolation. How easy it would be to turn the key. You’re so tired that you would fall asleep long before the fumes overwhelmed you and ushered you into the presence of God. Oh, yeah! What do I do about God?

This very real scenario has been slightly adjusted to disguise the individual, but the events are true. This individual made the right decision and got out of his car. What was it that protected him? Our contention is that he was forced to live consistently within his worldview. Even though he was physically and emotionally exhausted, his answer to “What do I do about God?” challenged him to see his life through the eyes of God. He knew he was not alone in his suffering and that his personal suffering would not be ignored by God who would, in His time, provide the necessary resolve. “...knowing that the same experiences of suffering are being accomplished by your brethren who are in the world. And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you” (1 Pet. 5:9b–10).

“Out of the Depths”—Worldview Security

Throughout the book of Psalms we read of the human emotions that accompany the broad spectrum of circumstances in the lives of the psalmists (and our own). We find joy and sadness, life and death, fear and pain, exuberance and depression, victory and defeat, hope and despair. The emotions of the psalmists are as diverse as the events that generate the emotions. What sustains the writers throughout the course of these events is personal faith and a biblical worldview—the ability to view life in accordance with God’s divine perspective as well as, and at times in opposition to, the human perspective (cf. Pss. 102, 116, 121).

When life’s inevitable traumas, catastrophes, and crises threaten to cast us violently upon destructive rocks and shoals, it is personal faith and the worldview of the individual in distress that provide the chart by which he or she may, or may not, steer to safety. Everyone has a worldview—Christian and non-Christian alike. Though we most frequently think of a worldview

in relation to apologetics, systematic theology, and philosophy, it applies just as much to our emotional trials in life as to our intellectual ones. Christianity proclaims the certainty of truth, the sufficiency of Scripture, and the sacredness of life. The Christian worldview is not one of sacredness in private and silence in public. Rather, it is one that touches every area of life. In the closing words of *The Universe Next Door*, James Sire reminds us that acceptance of a worldview, and specifically Christian theism, encompasses much more than intellectual assent.

To accept Christian theism only as an intellectual construct is not to accept it fully. There is a deeply personal dimension involved with grasping and living within this worldview, for it involves acknowledging our own individual dependence on God as his creatures, our own individual rebellion against God and our own individual reliance on God for restoration to fellowship with him. And it means accepting Christ as both our Liberator from bondage and Lord of our future.

To be a Christian theist is not just to have an intellectual worldview; it is to be personally committed to the infinite-personal Lord of the Universe. And it leads to an examined life that is well worth living.

The consistency with which one applies his or her worldview to daily life and all of its dimensions is crucial to sustaining personal stability in times of crisis.

For the Christian, it is not enough to rest upon the security of Christianity's superiority as a worldview. The Christian must also apply the biblical worldview and cling to it during the crises of life. Through God's grace, the application of Scripture and fervent prayer, the worldview of the Christian gives indispensable direction and protects individuals from detrimental and debilitating thoughts and emotions.

In the freefall of emotions, one's worldview is the safety net. It provides not only theological and philosophical security, it provides also psychological security. Our worldview affects how we think about life and death as well as what we think about life and death. Suicide, euthanasia, physician-assisted suicide, and other end-of-life decisions are all inextricably tied to our worldview. A Christian worldview, biblically grounded and consistently applied, will generate valid theological conclusions and personal resolution to these issues.

Today's challenge for the Christian is to maintain a worldview and its attending values in the overwhelming tide of postmodernism. Contemporary society has slipped from the moorings of truth and the God of the Bible, and is now adrift in an ocean of relativism and self-indulgence. In relation to the present discussion, such self-indulgence is most clearly seen in the emphasis on individual rights and the application of these rights to the "right to die" philosophy. The philosophical issue of the "right to die" has been widely debated and will certainly continue in the future.⁵ J. Daryl Charles sounds an alarm to which all Christians would be wise to listen:

In the years to come, we will doubtless be hearing a lot more about the 'right to die' and personal autonomy. The church—along with ethicists and the medical community in general—had better be prepared to inform the cultural debate in thoughtful and strategic ways—and be prepared to establish limits of individual 'right'. When all is said and done, there is only one ultimate basis upon which a 'right to die' can be predicated; self-centered will. In this regard, heaven and earth cry out against humanity: there is no valid basis for such a right.

Any discussion of rights, ethics, law, and public policy has presuppositions rooted in the worldviews of the participants. The relevance of Christianity to every area of life cannot be

discarded. When faith and religious principles are abandoned in public discourse and philosophy, we should not be surprised to read statements by Dr. Jack Kevorkian such as “In our modern world, medicine and religion should be completely divorced from one another.”

Part of the present need in both cultural engagement and evangelism is for Christians to understand the significance of worldviews. Only when we fully embrace the biblical worldview, with all of its ramifications, will we be able to adequately respond to the personal, social, and cultural crises of our time. Our present culture has a radically different view from that of the Bible regarding the nature of humanity. Having previously jettisoned the doctrine of God, the biblical perspective of humanity is now also being cast away. As Robert Bork has noted, “Convenience is becoming the theme of our culture. Humans tend to be inconvenient at both ends of their lives.”

A consistent biblical worldview is relevant to every aspect of suicide in our present culture. Even for those who are or feel helpless, there must still be the conviction that they are significant, especially if all circumstances suggest the opposite. Ultimately only a biblical perspective can accomplish this with any certainty or permanence. Writing of his experiences at Auschwitz, Dachau, and other Nazi death camps, physician Viktor Frankl commented frequently on suicide and its rejection even in the midst of unspeakable personal horror. He tells of talking to fellow prisoners on one occasion after food had been taken away from them.

Then I spoke of the many opportunities of giving life a meaning. I told my comrades (who lay motionless, although occasionally a sigh could be heard) that human life, under any circumstances, never ceases to have a meaning, and that this infinite meaning of life includes suffering and dying, privation and death. I asked the poor creatures who listened to me attentively in the darkness of the hut to face up to the seriousness of our situation. They must not lose hope but keep their courage in the certainty that the hopelessness of our struggle did not detract from its dignity and its meaning.

For the Christian, the creation of humanity in the image of God has far-reaching personal, theological, and cultural ramifications that must be considered; among them, the rejection of suicide in all of its manifestations.

James Sire argues that any worldview must address seven fundamental philosophical questions: *What is prime reality—the really real?*; *What is the nature of external reality, that is, the world around us?*; *What is a human being?*; *What happens to a person at death?*; *Why is it possible to know anything at all?*; *How do we know what is right and wrong?*; and *What is the meaning of human history?* The many issues regarding suicide are either directly or indirectly linked to each of the above questions, most especially the third, fourth, and sixth ones.

As we daily face the issues of suicide in our personal, professional and public lives, we must move beyond the rhetoric, slogans, and euphemisms. In a culture of convenience and bumper sticker ethics, we must adhere to sound doctrine and biblical perspectives. Contemporary cultural perspectives on suicide must be addressed by Christians from a biblical worldview and framework. Carl Henry has rightly observed, “Everywhere around us is strewn the philosophical wreckage of those who rely only on the voice of conscience, on social utility, on aesthetic gratification, on majority consensus—on everything but a sure Word of God.” He warns that, “The pagan option is always knocking at the door of the person who crowds God out of his or her life.”¹² This is certainly true of suicide.

A Christian worldview that only gives casual attention to the knowledge of the Holy is inconsistent, and therefore, will not forestall a personal or cultural slide into the acceptance of

suicide. Christians must hold firmly to and apply central doctrines of their faith, especially theology proper and Christology. In part, it is through an understanding, acceptance, and appreciation of the person and work of God the Father and God the Son that the option of suicide is diminished. Knowing Who it is that brings us out of the depths of despair can instill immeasurable comfort and consolation.

The Centerpiece for an Effective Worldview

When individuals choose a centerpiece for a table or for a special room, they generally try to pick something that will draw attention to it; something they think is special, attractive, and will be the focal point of everything else in the room. They know that if they choose the wrong piece, it will be overlooked and the effect they desired will be weakened or lost altogether. God is the centerpiece of the Christian worldview, not a church, a pastor, a mentor, or a culturally approved philosophy that believers think they must incorporate or placate. To take one's eyes from the Lord is to blur reality; it subjects one's thoughts and emotions to the philosophical currents of the time. To focus on the centerpiece of the Christian faith and to know him intimately helps us to see the world, its wonders, and its dangers, through the eyes of the One who created it and loves us. When one's vision is blurred, the dangers ahead go unnoticed until they engulf their victim. To understand suffering and the solutions the world is proposing, we must look to God to understand his purposes and plan so that we avoid slipping down slopes on which we may not be able to re-ascend.

The Creator God

In the opening chapter of the book of Genesis, human beings are introduced to their Creator, and in conjunction with this truth, to their intrinsic value and purpose. To undermine or underestimate the Christian understanding of God as Creator is to take from humanity an external source of protection and to place it at the mercy of its own internal fallen and selfish reason.

To be created *as* the image or likeness of God demands at least two responsibilities: that we *represent* Him to the world in a faithful manner and maintain a constructive *relationship* with God and His creation (Gen. 1:26–28). Raymond C. Van Leeuwen supports this twofold responsibility that man possesses as a reflector of the image of God:

First, humankind is God's representative upon earth, given the task of dominion over the nonhuman creation. The second model sees humankind as God's counterpart (*Gegenüber Gottes*), so that a dialogical relation between God and humankind exists (Stendebach, 1051–52). Both models are valid, in that they express aspects of being "in the image of God."

In order to care for the creation and communicate with God, humanity was given the gift of being able to share in His nature, the least of which are personality, truth, love, holiness, morality, creativity, and compassion. In their first responsibility, human beings are to reflect God's will and character in the way in which they rule. Everything that we do as human beings should promote justice, mercy, and righteousness (Ps. 72; Mic. 6:8). To harm another human being unjustly is to function contrary to the intended purpose of the Creator (cf. Gen. 9:6); a merciless act is a poor reflection of the Creator. To strike against the image of God is to strike against God himself. To belittle it, to injure it, mock it, or even kill it must, by natural correlation, be an offense to God. The second responsibility suggests that humankind possesses both rational and moral aptitudes. Our thoughts and our values must be in sync with the

Creator's if we are to have meaningful fellowship with him and properly reflect his character and will to others.

His created dignity consisted in knowledgeable and responsible relationships to the supernatural world and to fellow humans. His life was intended to consist of intelligible and dutiful devotion to God who is himself the truth and the good, and of service to his earthly neighbor.

The abilities that the Creator has built into us to relate to him and others is essential to the survival of humanity. *The manner in which we relate to him ultimately determines the manner in which we relate both to ourselves and others.*

When a child is born to us, she is in a real sense, an image bearer of her parents. But in what sense? Children naturally receive from their parents the ability to think, but must be instructed toward a morality (behavior) that is consistent with the Person who is the actual creator of the image they bear. In as much as they reflect the beliefs and morality of their parents, they remain accurate representations of their image, but should they detract from these, their image of their parents becomes marred. *And though the image is still present in them, it now takes on a different shape and direction.* As images of God, we are finite and imperfect with strong tendencies toward reflecting our own concerns and interests at the expense of God's. Too often we are images of the world rather than images of God.

Humanity's distinctiveness is found in one indisputable fact: that men and women are made as likenesses of God, therefore, it is essential that we recognize that being in the image of God involves, at least, a rational and moral likeness, otherwise there remains nothing (no restraint) intrinsic to humanity that can protect itself from its own atrocities. As our society persists at deconstructing God, we naturally deconstruct humanity down to its most primal instincts until its mode of operation is nothing more than its senses. How terrifying! We must remember that human dignity is inextricably bound to our being creatures made as images of God. To be separated from the Creator God is to be separated from dignity itself. "If the forms of reason and morality do not in fact belong to the *imago Dei* but rather are environmentally derived, *then no final reason can be given why dominion may not as legitimately be expressed in nonbenevolent as in benevolent ways*" (emphasis added).

From the creation of the world, God has revealed himself to humanity through the things he has made (we would suggest that this includes humanity itself, whom he made to reflect his will), but humanity chose to reject him and his glory to worship the creation (corruptible images). As a punishment for rejecting the Creator God, he "gave them over" to the lust of their heart, their vile passions, and to a debased mind (Rom. 1:24, 26, 28):

... to do those things which are not fitting; being filled with all unrighteousness, sexual immorality, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, evil-mindedness; they are whisperers, backbiters, haters of God, violent, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, undiscerning, untrustworthy, unloving, unforgiving, unmerciful; who, knowing the righteous judgment of God, that those who practice such things are deserving of death, not only do the same but also approve of those who practice them (Rom. 1:28–32, NKJV).

To ignore the Creator God and his purpose for creating humanity as the image of himself is to thrust fallen humanity upon itself. Do not miss the point of this passage (Rom. 1:18–32): these consequences come in the form of punishment upon humanity for disobedience. The ills of our time, which include suicide, euthanasia, and physician-assisted suicide, are consequences for a

humanity that suppresses the image of God and warnings of what a future without God holds. Society *cannot* survive apart from an acceptance of and commitment to the Creator God of the Old and New Testaments.

The Immanent/Transcendent God

Have evangelical Christians become so focused on their personal needs that they have neglected to develop a meaningful theology regarding the person of God? Have we become church-goers to satisfy personal aspirations or because of a spiritual necessity to identify ourselves with the supernatural? Have we become so interested in what we believe Jesus can do for us that we have forgotten that he came to represent the Father in all his glory, to show us what it means to be an image of God? Do we worship to receive blessing or do we receive blessing because we've worshipped the greatness of God? A personal relationship with God is necessary, but proves to be self-promoting and directionless when our knowledge of God's relationship with the world is deficient. David Wells believes that modern evangelicalism has lost sight of God's transcendent nature in favor of his immanent qualities. He observed that when a society overemphasizes transcendence, there emerges:

... a deism with a remote God, cool rationalism, and complete loss of Christological interest. On the other side [a focus on immanence], there emerged modern evangelicalism, which looked to a God "invested with all the gospel's transformative passion" but with a greatly diminished aura of transcendence—the God "below," warmer, closer, more engaging, and more susceptible to be translated into a purely private deity. In other words, evangelicals tended to dispense with God's otherness in the interests of promoting his relatedness through Christ and gospel faith.

To dispense with God's "otherness" can create a church body which views its faith subjectively, thus opening itself to the philosophies of the age, the least of which have been a tolerance of abortion and an apparent "blind eye" to realities of suicide and its equally troubling manifestations (euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide). God is present and active in our world and deeply interested in developing personal relationships with us (the immanent God), but this divine presence can be easily distorted when it is not understood in conjunction with an infinite God who exists outside the limits of space and time, and possesses an authority second to none (the transcendent God). To live the Christian life effectively (by this, we include the struggling with pain and suffering), we must strike a balance between the God who loves us and the God who will forever be outside our complete understanding and of whom we are unworthy and to whom we are ever subject. To miss or ignore this balance is to impinge upon life an unstable pride in one's spirituality to one extreme or, to the other extreme, in one's humility.

This imbalance eventually leads to theological error and may eventually lead some individuals to disappointment and depression. An overemphasis of immanence means that God is too much "for us" (we become too self-centered and, therefore, overconfident in our willingness to speak for God or discouraged when it appears that God is not "meeting our needs" the way we think He should); an overemphasis of transcendence means that God is too much "from us" (we become legalists or skeptics and, therefore, either make decisions thinking that God's perspective is undaunted by the difficulties connected with human tragedy, e.g., vitalism: the decision to sustain life at all costs, or doubt that a holy and incomprehensible God would be involved in our personal problems).

Erroneous thoughts in the area of suicide and physician-assisted suicide that stem from these extremes are: “I’ll be better off with the Lord;” “God wouldn’t want me to go through this kind of suffering;” “He’ll understand our decision;” “The Lord wouldn’t want anyone to sacrifice financial security to prolong a life unnecessarily;” “If God was so concerned about my life, he would not cause me so much difficulty;” “I’ll never be what God wants me to be; life’s just too hard for some of us;” and, “God doesn’t have time for a mess-up like me.”

Because God is immanent, he is keenly interested with the way we live our lives and the way we care for the lives of others; because he is transcendent, his greatness, power, knowledge, compassion, goodness, and purity establish a standard that is above and not subject to human experience, i.e., Himself. He is who He is and *not* what we make or want Him to be (Isa. 55:8–9).

Consequently, human value is divinely established and, therefore, not subject to human wisdom.

There is something that gives value to man from above. The value of man is not that he is the highest of the evolutionary process thus far, but that the supreme eternal being made man in his own image. It is not man’s estimation of himself, but the judgment of the holy God that gives man value.

Human life cannot be qualified by degree of function (healthiness), age, race, *etc.* Life, in and of itself, is valuable because it comes from God; to live is to be valuable. And since both the suffering and the dying have life, their value is equal to anyone else’s. All decisions that involve the termination of life must be made in the context of God’s view of life. As long as an individual has life, there remains purpose to that life. Even the life and death decisions regarding a non-cognitive terminally ill patient are filled with theological implications for those who must decide when to acquiesce to the disease. For a non-terminal person, the decision to kill oneself or to allow oneself to be killed *circumvents the divine purpose of one’s life*, which is an open book, with a finite understanding of one’s present experience, which is but one chapter.

We must always remember that our story is comprised of more than one character, and therefore, the purpose of our life intertwines with that of others (cf. Phil. 2:3–4). The wonderful and accurate expression of God’s immanence, “God knows what is best for me!” is directly traced back to an understanding of God’s transcendent nature. He knows what’s best because he is not blinded by or limited to the same earthly parameters as we; therefore, his purposes for each of us are not based on human personal experience or a “hope and a prayer”, but on a sovereign, intransigent plan that somehow links all of us to his Son’s eventual coming and his eternal Kingdom.

Immanence and transcendence collide before the throne of God when human deeds are measured by divine holiness (2 Cor. 5:9–11; cf. John 8:23). We must not become so enamored with “our Dad’s” love for us that we forget about our Father’s wrath. Humanity is a creation designed to reflect the will and character of God, and, in so doing, we develop a relationship with Him that gives us the strength and courage to live faithfully through the difficulties of life until death rewards us with receptive eyes, a warm smile, and a long-awaited voice saying, “well done!”

The Incarnate God

The most visible expression of God’s immanence and transcendence is seen in the incarnation of God’s Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. He who was “equal with God” became one of us, even “to the point of death.” How does the truth of this event effect the way we live our lives

from spiritual birth to eventual death? How does the incarnation impact the way we view suffering and the way we die? From the heavens God entered his creation as a human being, as the perfect image of God, not to help us escape physical death, but to give us abundant and eternal life before and after death. How do we honor this deliverance, this undeserved redemption as we live out our lives in these frail, failing bodies? Do we succumb to the pressure of the “right to die” advocates of this world who see suffering as the last great enemy of life, or do we dedicate the “living” of our lives to promoting the “right to life” gospel that we inherited as a gift from the incarnate God who dedicated his entire life to secure eternal life for humanity? How many lives did Jesus Christ impact for eternity through His suffering?

We are not thinking of only his suffering at the cross, but of the abuse and insults he suffered throughout his life as he interacted with the philosophy of his time. How many lives can we impact for eternity through the way we interpret and deal with our own physical, spiritual, and emotional suffering throughout our lives and in the process of dying? The answers to these questions have their answer in how we understand the incarnation of God’s Son.

Without the earthly existence of the God-Man, we would not have a perfect reflection of the image of God or a living example of God’s commitment to the redemption of humanity. We would be subjects of a king who would seem distant or uninvolved (transcendent) and whose understanding of our human weakness would, therefore, be suspect. We would have no sacrifice for our sin, which would leave us without hope and victims of our incessant guilt. Without the incarnation, suffering would be meaningless and death would be a welcome relief. How agonizing must be the lives of those who look to humanity for the answers to their suffering (their most recent answer is: “Let us ease your suffering by giving us the right to kill you!”). How hopeless must be the lives of Christians who have failed to incorporate the importance of the incarnation of Christ to the survival of a degenerative humanity into their daily behavior. Without the incarnation of Christ, humanity’s alternative becomes the methods (madness) of Kevorkian. It is the “incarnate” solution against the “carnate” solution. It is life against death!

How we live and die is inextricably linked to our understanding and commitment to the incarnate God. Our joys and our sufferings have purpose just as did our Savior’s. The work that Jesus loved was devoted to providing insight, through instruction and personal example, into the value of living life in communion with God and others. However, even the unrelenting accusations of an ungrateful and blind hierarchy and the incomparable agony in the Garden of Gethsemane delineate purpose and direction to the difficulties that confronted our Savior (cf. Heb. 12:3–4). The incarnate God impacts every aspect of our lives. He teaches us about the will and character of God, he provides a path to fellowship with God, He instructs us in our dealings with the world, He encourages us to struggle through the trials that threaten to undo us, He guarantees purpose of effort and an eventual end to all manner of suffering, He grounds our hope beyond our present experience. The incarnation “truly is the central fact of history.”

To align oneself with the Incarnate God is to become a prophet in favor of healing, not a proponent of thoughtless and premature termination. It is to be an advocate for palliative care, not an adversary of suffering. It is to be an acquirer of solutions, not an acquiescer to the final solution. The fruits of the Spirit of God that describe the life of the incarnate Christ are incompatible with the depressive and hopeless characteristics of a person considering self-termination—they are also uncharacteristic of a human being who looks at suffering terminal patients as individuals who have lost their value as human beings simply because their quality of life does not meet a subjective societal standard.

Suffering is a difficult experience to endure, but we must not be too quick to eliminate it, for even the Lord “who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame” (Heb. 12:2). It was an act of obedience that provided hope to the entire human race. Suffering is the product of physical, intellectual, or spiritual conflict; it is neither moral nor immoral. It is an experience that demands serious attention, an event that changes the lives of those who pass through it. It’s greatest purpose is to bring us face to face with our finite humanity so that we might more clearly see the face of the divine (1 Pet 1:6–12). However, there is a suffering that should be avoided at all cost and is worse than the suffering that precedes death; it is the suffering that follows death, for it is eternal and has no purpose (cf. Luke 16:19–31). So when we suffer in this world, ensure that it is not because of evil that we have done, but because of good (1 Pet. 3:13–17). Like the suffering of the blind man, our suffering can become a testimony to the glory of God (John 9:1–5). And like the suffering of the Incarnate God, our suffering can reflect his effect on our lives and possibly lead some, who are ignorant of his grace, into the presence of the Father.

The Resurrected God

The solution to the complexities of the world is the simplicity of the gospel and its attending consequences. The simplicity of the gospel rests on the message of the resurrection of the Son of God. Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 15 emphasize the importance of the resurrection for the Christian faith: “And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins” (15:17). With Christ there is hope, without Christ there is no hope.

Helpless, hopeless, and worthless are three words frequently used to describe the feelings of those who are suicidal. Such feelings are not restricted solely to non-Christians—suicide claims believers as well. Yet, an understanding of, appreciation of, and daily application of the reality of the resurrection of Jesus Christ provides daily hope for the believer that reaches into the depths of the human heart.

The resurrection of Christ offers not only hope in the next life: it offers hope in this life. Pain, fear, frustration, uncertainty, loneliness, and discouragement are all real and debilitating physical and emotional experiences. The reality of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, through which we have present and eternal hope, is equally real but in no way debilitating. Because of the resurrection we are not *helpless*, for we have a risen Priest; we are not *hopeless* for we hear the risen Prophet; and we are not *worthless*, for we serve the risen King. It is in light of this reality that Peter addressed first-century believers in distress, writing, “May grace and peace be yours in the fullest measure. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who, according to his great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Pet. 1:2b–3). Because Jesus has been raised by the Father, the Christian has “a living hope” (cf. Titus 2:13). The Resurrected God offers, to all who respond, a hope for living—a hope beyond suffering, pain and despair.

The Loving God

“We have come to know and have believed the love which God has for us. God is love, and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him” (1 John 4:26). The apostle John’s words proclaim that relying on the love of God is an integral part of the Christian Life. Knowing and understanding God’s love for humanity as a whole, and for us as individuals, has enormous consequence. *The human need for acceptance is finally and fully realized in the character of God when there is a proper relationship with him.*

Describing God's attribute of love, J. I. Packer writes, "God's love is an exercise of his goodness toward individual sinners whereby, having identified himself with their welfare, he has given his Son to be their Savior, and now brings them to know and enjoy him in a covenant relation." God's love toward humanity is observed in four dimensions: benevolence, grace, mercy, and persistence.²³ God's benevolence is expressed through the attention he pays to those he loves. It is his unselfish interest in each of us for our own sakes. Intrinsic to his love is a concern for every aspect of our lives that is expressed indirectly (Matt. 5:45; Acts 14:17) and directly, the most obvious expression evidenced by the sending of his Son (Rom. 5:6–10; 1 John 4:10). It is through God's grace that he deals with us, not on the basis of our merit but according to our need, requiring nothing from us in return (Eph. 1:5–8; 2:8–9). To speak of God's mercy is to address the tenderhearted compassion he has for his people. Erickson notes, "It is his tenderness of heart toward the needy. If grace contemplates man as sinful, guilty, and condemned, mercy sees him as miserable and needy." It is in this dimension of God's love that he responds to our spiritual and physical infirmities, frailties, and fears (cf. Ex. 3:7; Matt. 34:14; Mark. 1:41). The persistence of God reveals his love in that he is patient in withholding judgment (2 Pet. 3:9).

Each of these dimensions touches on suicide and the suicidal person in that they help us to see the *depth* of God's care and concern for us. The intense introspection of the suicidal individual and the anthropocentric focus of those who would assist in suicide ignore the active love and concern of God. The difficulties we face in life are very real, but so also is the loving God to whom we can take them. An inadequate view of God will always lead to an inadequate view of humanity. When the former is diminished the latter is exalted with the inevitable result, not of "Thy will be done," but, "my will be done." Such an end leads to suicidal thoughts and other related inhumane acts in individuals and cultures that abandon the infinite and selfless love of God for finite and self-serving human reason.

Conclusion

We are not attempting to downplay the trauma of suffering for we have felt its blade; nor are we advocating vitalism for end of life decisions, but rather, serious reflection that incorporates a theological grid through which life and death decisions pass. Human life *must* be viewed through the eyes of Him who created us in His image, who, though He exists outside our complete understanding, chooses to offer fellowship with Himself by living among us through the miracle of the incarnation, who died for human sin and rose from the dead to give us reasons to overcome sin's debilitating effects. And why? Because he loves us!

When the torrents of life crash over us and the gales of change shriek through our culture, we must cling to the truths of Scripture and rest in the peace and plan of God. We are not wise enough to make decisions without Him, and all His purposes for each of us can never be fully known. Two ways have always been set before humanity—one of life, one of death. As individuals and societies, we will reap the consequences of our choices. Through the grace of God, may we choose life and, in so doing, live and affirm the hymnist's words:

When darkness veils His lovely face,
I rest on His unchanging grace;
In every high and stormy gale,
My anchor holds within the veil.

On Christ, the solid Rock I stand—
All other ground is sinking sand,
All other ground is sinking sand.
His oath, His covenant, His blood
Support me in the whelming flood;
When all around my soul gives way,
He then is all my hope and stay.