

Saving Lives

What the Bible Has to Say About Suicide

Depression is subtle. It has a way of sneaking up on you. You're not quite sure when, how, or why it comes, but you can't seem to get from under it. It's more than sadness. More than disappointment. Depression is a shroud of darkness around you, even though the sun is shining. It's a thousand weighted blankets on top of you holding you captive to your thoughts. It's quicksand. The moment you step in you feel trapped, and the more you move the deeper you sink.

Matt Adler, a successful attorney, husband, and father of two young children found himself sinking in the sands of depression. The winter of 2011 was plagued with great economic peril causing Matt great anxiety, sleepless nights, and reportedly, a "crumbling loss of self-esteem." Seeking help from both a psychologist and a psychiatrist, his wife Dr. Jennifer Stuber, a public health expert at the University of Washington, recalls how "No one took the signs seriously. The psychiatrist seemed almost annoyed."

Matt drove himself to a local gun shop. He'd never owned or fired a gun in his life. With no record of criminal or violent behavior, Matt passed the legal background check. A couple of hours later, Matt used that gun to kill himself. He was 40 years old.

The Morning News

On Tuesday, November 17th Roni Caryn Rabin's article "'How Did We Not Know?' Gun Owners Confront a Suicide Epidemic" was published in *The New York Times*. Rabin reports how "according to national health statistics, 24,432 Americans used guns to kill themselves in 2018, up from 19,392 in 2010." In fact, while statistics estimate that gun violence kills approximately 40,000 Americans, causing us to focus on issues like murder, mass shootings, and accidental deaths, Rabin writes that "these account for little more than one-third of the nation's firearms fatalities. The majority of gun deaths are suicides – and just over half of suicides involve guns."

While researchers are adamant about the fact that suicide attempts and completion have not increased during the pandemic, particularly in response to Jake Tapper's recent error in tweeting an inaccurate report claiming "suicide figures are up 200% since lockdown, they do acknowledge that there has been an increase in the number of Americans reporting symptoms of depression. Julia Musto reports in an article for the *New York Post* that "Forty-seven percent of people with a household income of less than \$20,000 and 41 percent of people with household savings under \$5,000 said they had experienced symptoms of depression." In addition, the FBI, according to NPR, reports of "a new record of 3.9 million background checks to purchase or possess firearms in June. That eclipsed the previous record set in March of 3.7 million background checks."

With a steady rise in gun sales, coronavirus deaths, unemployment, and the disappointment around not seeing family for the holidays due to travel restrictions or death, we must be more aware of those around us struggling with suicide. Rabin reports of how researchers like Dr. Stuber and former Marine, gun owners like Brett Bass, are teaming up to save lives. Bass and

Stuber believe that everything from gun retailers asking more questions of first-time gun buyers to gun owners putting locks on their firearms could give someone “enough time to maybe change [their] mind.”

What Does the Bible Say About Suicide?

After reading these news reports, the question that came to my mind is: what does the Bible have to say about suicide? Public Health researchers like Dr. Stuber and gun owners like Brett Bass are doing everything they can to disrupt the link between gun ownership and suicide. But, does the Bible have anything to say about it? Can the Bible help save a life contemplating suicide?

The Seven Suicides

There are seven accounts of suicide or attempted suicide in the Bible. The first is found in Judges 9:54 where Abimelech, after wounded by a woman who crushed his skull by dropping a millstone on his head, cried out saying, “draw your sword and kill me, or they’ll say about me, ‘a woman killed him.’” So, Abimelech’s armor-bearer killed him.

King Abimelech was not the only leader in the book of Judges that displayed suicidal thoughts. In Judges 16:21–31 we find the story of Israel’s strongest Judge Samson. After being deceived by Delilah, Samson is captured by the Philistines, they gouge out his eyes, bind him with bronze shackles, and force him to grind grain in prison. While worshipping their god Dagon, the Philistines bring Samson out to mock and taunt him. Standing between two pillars, Samson prays, “Lord, God, please remember me. Strengthen me, God, just once more. With one act of vengeance, let me pay back the Philistines for my two eyes.” Pushing against the pillars of the temple Samson concludes declaring, “let me die with the Philistines.” And the judge dies with his oppressors.

In the heat of war, 1 Samuel 31:4-6 records how King Saul was losing to the Philistine army. So he turned to his armor-bearer and said, “draw your sword and run me through with it, or these uncircumcised men will come and run me through and torture me!” The Bible says that Saul’s armor-bearer was too afraid to complete the request. So “Saul took his sword and fell on it.” After seeing that his leader was dead, the armor-bearer also fell on his sword killing himself.

In 2 Samuel 17:23 we read the story of Ahithophel, an advisor to King David’s son Absalom, who once Absalom rejected any more of his counsel “set his house in order” and hanged himself.

Even King Zimri, a man who was king for seven days in Tirzah, once realizing the Philistines would soon over power him, set his palace on fire with himself inside dying amidst the flames.

There is only one clear example of suicide in the New Testament found in Matthew 27:3–10. There, the writer shares the story of how Judas hanged himself over the immense grief and remorse felt for cooperating in Jesus’ execution.

Jonah’s Suicide Attempt

If you were counting, that’s only six stories. The last I’d like to draw your attention to is found in Jonah 1:11–15. In these verses we read about a

prophet who God has given the command to go and preach to the people in Nineveh so that they may repent and turn away from their evil practices. Jonah refuses and flees to the city of Tarshish.

While on a ship to Tarshish God sends a storm on the sea with great winds that almost break the boat. Upon realizing that he is to blame for this great storm, Jonah asks the men to throw him overboard. Initially, the men refuse and simply keep trying to row to dry land. With no reprieve, the men prayed, "Lord, don't let us perish because of this man's life, and don't charge us with innocent blood! For you, Lord, have done just as you pleased." And they threw Jonah overboard.

Some Bible scholars count this story in Jonah as a suicide attempt. For example, Geoffrey Bromiley's *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* defines suicide as "The taking of one's own life, or causing it to be taken by another, regardless of motive, circumstances, or method used." Based on this definition he cites the six examples I mentioned above, along with Jonah.

In the story of Jonah's suicide attempt, though, what is encouraging for us to know is that God intervened and prevented the completion of Jonah's attempt. In fact, the Bible says in Jonah 1:17, "The Lord appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights." In other words, Jonah attempted to reject God's will for his life either by detour or death. But Jonah's suicide attempt did not anger God. Instead, it caused God to step in and save him.

Live For God

I believe God saved Jonah because in the Bible we learn that God does not desire His followers to die for Him. On the contrary, He wants them to live for Him. Paul writes in Romans 12:1, "Therefore, brothers and sisters, in view of the mercies of God, I urge you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God; this is your true worship." During the time of antiquity many of the cultural religions taught that the gods required a blood sacrifice. So, many sacrificed women, children, anyone deemed necessary killing them on an altar as a sacrifice to the gods. Paul is countering this by declaring that the God who made the Heavens and the Earth, He does not require a blood sacrifice. He is not wanting you to die for Him. He actually wants you to live for Him.

It is in living for God that your life is a daily act of sacrifice and worship. In this sense, suicidal ideation and even suicidal attempts do not anger God. What God sees is someone who is overwhelmed like Jonah; someone who is filled with guilt like Judas; someone who is overcome with fear like Saul; even someone who is overcome by purpose like Samson. And when God sees this in us He is not angered He is moved to compassion.

In the story of Jonah we see God send a big fish to save Jonah, but in the story of Jesus we see God Himself walking amongst humanity seeking to heal and restore. See, when God sees broken people, He seeks to save. When God sees broken people, He seeks to restore. When God sees broken people, He seeks to make them whole. God wants to save and heal you so that you have the strength and courage to live for Him. That is God's response to suicide.

The Takeaway

And so no matter what is going on in the world. No matter what has you feeling overwhelmed, afraid, filled with guilt, grief, or worthlessness, know that God desires nothing more than that you live and as Jesus says in John 10:10 “have life more abundantly.” Please don’t take your life. Know that there is a God in Heaven who loves you in all of your uniqueness. He believes that the greatest gift you could ever give Him is to live and live more abundantly.

*If you or someone who know is struggling with thoughts of suicide, depression, or anxiety encourage them to get the help they need. Be with them. Talk with them. Love them. Recommend a counselor. And always share the Suicide Prevention Lifeline number, where a counselor is available 24/7 to help: 800-273-8255. Also check out the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention to learn more about how you can help save a life. Click [here](#) for the link.