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Reflections explores biblical and theological questions and seeks to foster theological and doctrinal unity in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Its intended audience is church administrators, church leaders, pastors, and teachers.

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SUICIDE: A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE AND THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

A Statement of the Biblical Research Institute Ethics Committee

The question of suicide¹ has gained a new urgency in our society because it has become a public health problem.² The fact that in some countries, physician-assisted suicide is legalized or even societally condoned raises important questions for the Christian believer and how to relate to it. For many today, the human power of choice, given by God, extends also to the power of choice to end our own lives. The individual liberty and the right to define one's own destiny fares well in a secular culture where human autonomy and self-determination are valued highly. In a society where Judeo-Christian values and convictions diminish in importance and the human right to choose becomes more powerful,³ Christians are called to engage the issue of suicide from a biblical perspective.⁴ This even more so because the question of ending one's own life involves the most intimate and personal choices a person can make. These choices are central not only to one's personal dignity and autonomy, but ultimately affect our very existence and thus deal with the question of life itself. For Bible-believing Christians, this also touches upon our accountability towards God, our Creator.⁵ This statement seeks to explore what the Bible has to say on this issue.⁶

From a biblical perspective, the complexity of suicide is a challenge because in the Old Testament Hebrew and New Testament Greek texts, there appears to be no vocabulary expressing an equivalent concept for the English term "suicide." Beyond the absence of a particular biblical terminology,⁷ we have to recognize that in suicide we encounter a deep human paradox. According to Lewis B. Smedes, "it is, on the one hand, a sign of human power, the ultimate power to determine one's own final destiny. On the other hand, it is the ultimate sign of human weakness and failure."⁸ In the self-termination of life, the greatest freedom and dignity that human beings are endowed with—namely, their ability to choose freely—comes to a permanent and irreversible end. The dignity that comes from our ability to freely choose is obliterated. "To destroy oneself is to destroy one's own dignity"⁹ and ability to choose. In contrast to animals, human beings are capable to freely affirm or destroy their life. Dietrich Bonhoeffer aptly pointed out, "Human beings can do

what no animal can: they can voluntarily bring death upon themselves."¹⁰

Suicide is also complex and complicated because it is rarely caused by a single circumstance or event. Instead, a range of factors—at the individual, relationship, community, and social levels—can increase the risk.¹¹ While there is a well-established link between suicide and mental disorders (especially depression, but also alcohol use disorders), especially in high-income countries, many suicides also happen when people experience substantial conflict, disaster, violence, abuse, or significant loss with a strong sense of isolation. There is also what has been called "coerced suicide,"¹² where language, especially in cultish environments, can prompt someone to choose to die.¹³ Suicide rates are high¹⁴ amongst vulnerable groups who experience discrimination, such as refugees and migrants;¹⁵ indigenous peoples; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex persons; and prisoners. Beyond these risk factors in the intentional taking of one's life, suicide also involves other complex questions, such as various ethical, medical, and legal issues like the "withdrawal or withholding of medical treatment, involuntary treatment, high-risk, experimental, and unconventional treatment, euthanasia, assistance, and physician assistance in suicide, request for maximal treatment, and many others."¹⁶ It also creates significant trauma and shame for family members and friends of the person who committed suicide.¹⁷

In this article we will not deal with the issue of euthanasia, nor will we focus on possible and potential reasons why people end their life. Since for Seventh-day Adventists the Bible is the ultimate norm and highest authority in matters of faith and practice, we will rather explore some relevant biblical teachings that can help us in dealing with this question from a biblical perspective. These biblical perspectives will guide our theological response to it.

The Biblical Evidence

The Sacredness of Human Life

Before looking at some specific biblical passages that deal with suicide, we should remember that from a

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biblical-theological perspective the issue of suicide cannot be comprehended adequately without an understanding of the Christian belief in the sanctity of human life that is derived from the biblical doctrine of God as Creator (Gen 9:6).¹⁸ Furthermore, the apostle Paul reminds us that “you are not your own”! (1 Cor 6:19 NKJV), because we ultimately belong to God. He is our Creator, and the Bible teaches that humankind was made in the image of God with the ability to reason and the capacity to choose. Carrying the image of God, the Christian attitude toward human life is one of reverence and sanctity. The biblical doctrine of creation regards life as a property of the divine Creator where all human beings derive the right to life from God. Our origin in God implies the duty of cherishing, protecting, and preserving human life,¹⁹ and brings with it an accountability toward God. This accountability toward God is anchored not only in the sixth commandment, which specifically prohibits killing,²⁰ but also in the entire Decalogue which expresses respect for human life. Since God remains the ultimate owner of our lives, the Christian church throughout its history has generally held that it is a sin to kill human life deliberately and directly.²¹ Because God is the Lord and Giver of all life, humans have a responsibility and duty to respect life and not to take life. God has the sole prerogative to determine when life begins and ends. The sacredness of the human person, as made in the image of God (Gen 1:26–28), not his or her value, helps us to respond fruitfully and faithfully to questions of life and death.²² It is in the light of this biblical understanding of the sanctity of human life that believers are called to consider the question of suicide and other ethical issues.

Biblical Passages Dealing With Suicide

Before we turn to the few explicit passages where death by suicide is mentioned in the Bible,²³ we will briefly look at some passages where in Scripture people express the desire to die. While these people did not end their lives, they nevertheless were plagued by desperate thoughts because they had become deeply exhausted to the point where life had become so burdensome that they even expressed the desire not to live anymore. This is significant for our discussion because it illustrates the fact that even faithful believers are not entirely exempt from these thoughts. One is reminded of the prophet Elijah, who after courageously taking a stand for God was threatened with persecution and became so exhausted fleeing from Jezebel that he “requested for himself that he might die” and said, “It is enough; now Lord, take my life” (1 Kgs 19:4 NASB). In a similar manner, after his great disappointment that things had not turned out as he had hoped, the prophet Jonah exclaimed, “O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live!” (Jonah 4:3 NKJV). While Elijah and Jonah did not

end their lives and God continued to work with them, both at one point in their lives thought that it would be better to die than to live! Nevertheless, they left it in God’s hands, rather than taking it upon themselves whether or not they should die. Job is another example that comes to mind. After having been confronted with a barrage of calamities and the death of his children and being exposed to severe sickness himself, Job cursed the day of his birth (Job 3:1, 11) and wondered why death does not come (3:21). In the New Testament the apostle Paul at one point became so burdened beyond his strength that he did not know how to carry on his work and “despaired even of life” (2 Cor 1:8 NKJV). In the book of Revelation, during the severe circumstances described in the fifth trumpet, people “desire to die” (Rev 9:6) but death will flee from them. These examples indicate that the biblical writers knew examples where people were in the mood to die, even though they did not end their lives. We can learn from these biblical examples that God treats His children kindly, deals with their suicidal thoughts with compassion, and desires to sustain human life.

Death is one of the inescapable realities of human existence in the Bible. It is interesting that in the Old Testament, which is full of wars, bloodshed, murder, and other acts of violence, the death at one’s own hand is rare and “there are only a handful of instances of suicide, all in narrative texts.”²⁴ This has led some pro-suicide proponents to conclude that the Bible does not explicitly denounce the act of suicide.²⁵ While the Bible does not deal exhaustively and very explicitly with the issue of suicide, there are nevertheless several passages in the Bible that can shed some light on this question.²⁶ There is the story of Saul (1 Sam 31:3–5), Saul’s armor-bearer (1 Sam 31:3–5), Ahithophel (2 Sam 17:23), Zimri (1 Kgs 16:18–19), and Judas (Matt 27:3–5). We will also look briefly at the story of Samson (Judg 16:28–30), although some dispute that this is a case of suicide.

Saul (1 Sam 31:3–5)

This is the first incident of suicide in the Bible. After Saul’s sons were killed on the battlefield, the Philistines pressed hard after Saul who became critically wounded. Not wanting to be abused by his enemies, Saul asked his armor bearer to kill him (1 Sam 31:4a), but when he refused to implement Saul’s command, Saul took his own sword and fell on it, ending his own life with his own hands (1 Sam 31:4b). This narrative differs from the story later told by an Amalekite messenger in 2 Samuel 1:6–10, who claimed that he killed the king. The most likely explanation for this discrepancy is that the Amalekite lied.²⁷ However, what is even more important for our investigation is David’s reaction to the purported act of voluntary euthanasia as a deed of mercy for the suffering king Saul. He was displeased with such an action, finding

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“the Amalekite’s action not to be compassionate but offensive and worthy of severe punishment (2 Sam. 1:1–16).”²⁸ Although some have maintained that no ethical evaluation of Saul’s suicide is given, it has been pointed out that the intentionally framed progression of Saul’s story in 1 and 2 Samuel indicates that “*his respect for life gradually diminishes*”²⁹ and Saul “gradually loses respect for human life and finally takes his own.”³⁰ O’Mathúna concludes that “rather than viewing Saul’s suicide as an isolated incident with no moral comment, this scene is *the tragic conclusion to a literary masterpiece soaked in moral comment*. Tragedy implies that what ‘is’ is not what ‘ought’ to be.”³¹ Death and the killing of himself fits the pattern in which Saul had begun to deal with all his problems. “To claim that Saul’s suicide can be taken to commend suicide is to completely misinterpret the purpose of this tragic narrative.”³² Ironically, Saul did not escape being treated dishonorably by the Philistines, which was his fear that led to the decision to kill himself. After his death he was decapitated (1 Sam 31:9), stripped of his armor, and his body was fastened to the wall of Beth Shan in Philistia (1 Sam 31:9–10).

Saul’s Armor-Bearer (1 Sam 31:3–5)

The second episode of suicide in the Bible is closely connected to the first. After failing to obey Saul’s request to kill him and after watching Saul die by his own hand, his armor-bearer followed suit and did the same (1 Sam 31:4–5). This was not a heroic act of solidarity to be simulated by others. The biblical text reveals that the deaths of Saul and his armor-bearer actually caused the rest of the Israelites to flee the battle (1 Sam 31:7). “It is an act driven by fear which causes the Israelites, in turn to fear and give up their fight.”³³

Ahithophel (2 Sam 17:23)

The third case of a suicide in the Bible is that of Ahithophel. Ahithophel knew how to execute a successful revolt. After David’s son Absalom rejected Ahithophel’s counsel to assassinate his father, Ahithophel returned to his hometown, put his house in order, and strangled himself. The fact that he first organized his household before he killed himself indicates that this was a calculated and deliberate suicide that was conducted with intentionality.³⁴ Ahithophel knew that if David got word of his counsel he would be treated as a traitor.³⁵ Thus, his suicidal action was likely driven by fear and cowardice. The story shows that “without descending to the level of the explicit, the writer conveys the truth that human wisdom untempered by divine revelation produces results that are neither desirable nor productive.”³⁶ While David sought counsel in the Word of the Lord (1 Sam 23:4–6; 2 Sam 5:19, 23, 7:1–17) and received corresponding blessings, Absalom’s counsel from mere human advisers

like Ahithophel led to frustrated plans, curses, and the death of the one who opposed the Lord and His anointed.

Zimri (1 Kgs 16:18–19)

The fourth incident of suicide that we find in Scripture is Zimri, king of Israel. After Zimri assassinated Elah (1 Kgs 16:8–10), the Israelites decided to appoint their own king, Omri, the commander of the army, and they laid siege to Zimri’s headquarters in Tirzah (vv. 16–17). Once Zimri saw this event transpire, he set the royal palace on fire “over himself” and thus committed suicide (vv. 18–19). It is not clear from the biblical account why Zimri committed suicide; perhaps he wanted to avoid the humiliation of being captured, shamefully treated, publicly executed, and having his body abused.³⁷ Zimri was the shortest reigning king in Israel and reigned only seven days.³⁸ His entire reign is characterized by committing “sins” and “doing evil” (vs. 19), which would include his suicide that ended his life. Thus, he “is the most spectacularly unsuccessful king of all. Not only does he fail to put a son on the throne of Israel (however briefly)—he himself also fails to reign for more than a week. . . . Zimri’s suicide brings the seven-day ‘reign’ to its end.”³⁹

Before we turn to the last clear episode of suicide in Scripture, the death of Judas, we will briefly look at another story in the Old Testament, the death of Samson.

Samson’s Death (Judg 16:28–30)

Samson’s case is a bit more ambiguous. His death is often associated with committing suicide. Towards the end of his life, he was blind and stood between the supporting pillars of the Philistine temple of Dagon. While Samson expressed his desire “to die with the Philistines” (Judg 16:30 NKJV) he also prayed to God (“O Sovereign LORD”) that He might “remember” him and “strengthen” him “once more” so that he might get revenge on the Philistines (v. 28).⁴⁰ These biblical indicators have led numerous biblical commentators to conclude that this act was not suicide, even though Samson died as a result of it and expressed his wish to die with the Philistines. Some commentators have concluded that the motive was divine justice and judgment, not self-escape.⁴¹ In light of the later positive biblical assessment of Samson as a man of faith (Heb 11:32–34), it is doubtful that Daniel I. Block’s one-sided characterization of Samson as “totally self-centered” with a “total lack of concern for the divine agenda” is correct.⁴² Him being mentioned in Hebrews 11:32 as one of the heroes of faith, however, does not justify his desire to die with the Philistines. Despite his flawed character, Samson still was an agent of God’s judgment and was used by God. This leads us to the last clear incident of suicide in the Bible, the death of Judas.

Judas (Matt 27:3-5)

After Jesus was condemned to death by the Jewish leaders, Judas was “seized with regret” (*metameletheis*) over his betrayal and tried to return the money, which they refused, and so he cast the thirty pieces of silver down in the temple, resulting in the defilement of the temple (Matt 27:3). Judas was cognizant that he had sinned because he had “betrayed innocent blood” (v. 4). Throwing the pieces of silver into the temple, Judas departed and hanged himself (v. 5). Craig Blomberg has pointed out that “this verb [*metamelomai*; v. 3] is much rarer in the New Testament than the typical verb for ‘repenting’ (*metanoō*) and seems here to refer to a change of mind or feeling of regret, which falls considerably short of full-fledged repentance.”⁴³ Jesus’s statement about Judas at the Last Supper reveals his true spiritual condition (Matt 26:24). It is interesting that in Scripture hanging was considered a curse from God (Deut 21:23) and even the Romans, who saw certain acts of suicide as honorable, viewed suicide by hanging as dishonorable.⁴⁴

Some Ethical Assessments and Conclusions

None of the biblical passages that report suicides command it; neither do they commend the act of self-murder. They simply report it. There is not a single remark in the five biblical accounts of suicide that speak positively of taking one’s life or that praise the person who does so. Eugene H. Merrill has pointed out that none of the episodes in the Old Testament “is viewed in a favorable light, as a viable option to be emulated in difficult times.”⁴⁵ Each of these biblical suicides is the culmination of a life that had turned away from God. The individuals who execute their own death in the Bible are men who have rejected the living God, which is true especially with Saul, Ahithophel, Zimri, and Judas. If we consider the incidences of suicide in the Bible in this light, these biblical cases leave little question about the wrongness of the act.⁴⁶

This conclusion is supported by another biblical passage, which is perhaps the most important passage in the Bible on this topic of suicide and one that, unfortunately, is often overlooked by those who support the right to suicide and advocates who oppose it alike: Acts 16:28.⁴⁷ Here Paul was preventing the suicide of the Philippian jailer. After Paul and Silas were thrown into prison in Philippi for preaching the gospel, an earthquake struck the foundations of the prison and caused all prisoners’ chains to come loose (Acts 16:26). Being afraid the prisoners might escape, and in order to avoid shame and punishment, the jailer drew his sword and was about to kill himself (v. 27).⁴⁸ The Roman mindset would have considered this an honorable way to die. However,

Paul shouted, “May you not do this evil deed [*kakon*] to yourself, for we are all here!” (Acts 16:28).

“The significance of the text lies in the fact that it contains an example of an apostle explicitly categorizing suicide as an “evil” moral deed and giving a direct prohibition against it.”⁴⁹ While such an act might have been permissible or even commendable by Roman standards,⁵⁰ Paul did not follow the pagan Roman value system but evaluated the act of suicide according to the moral judgment of God’s will.

In light of the sacredness of human life, that is derived from the fact that God is our Creator and in light of the fact that human beings bear His image, suicide fails to honor God’s design for the preservation of human life. Not only are human beings called to be fruitful and multiply (Gen 1:26–28; 8:17; 9:1, 7; Exod 1:7) and to rule over the earth as God’s stewards, they are also called not to hate their own body. Instead, they should “feed” and “care for” it (Gk. *thalpō*, lit. “cherish”) (Eph 5:29), rather than destroy it through (self-)killing. Such self-care is not sinful but reflects the love of God who calls us to love our neighbors as ourselves (Matt 22:39; Mark 12:31).

Furthermore, God’s commandment “You shall not kill” (Exod 20:13) is a precept that holds true throughout the entire storyline of Scripture. We are reminded that we ultimately belong to God (1 Cor 6:19). We belong to Him by creation and redemption and, therefore, we do not have the right to destroy what belongs to God. The sixth commandment forbids all murder, including the murder of oneself.⁵¹ As Lewis Smedes has aptly said, “My own life is as precious as that of any other. It is God’s gift to me, just as my neighbor’s life is God’s gift to him. To assault myself is to violate what God commands me to respect.”⁵² The sixth commandment is a divine “law of life that obliges us both to let people live and help them to live.”⁵³ Life is God’s gift and therefore, as the owner of all human life, God alone has the right to take it. Suicide fails to recognize life as such a God-given gift. No Israelite acting on his own could decide that he had the right to end someone’s life nor to take his own life. Biblically speaking, our life must always be viewed as a gift that we receive from God.

While the Bible does not deal with suicide extensively, it *never* praises suicide as something good or commends it as something to emulate. Rather, it views it as a category of murder, where the willful and planned termination of human life is implemented. Such an act is sinful for at least the following reasons: (1) it is the irremediable and permanent destruction of life, which biblically speaking is a gift God has given; (2) it is an affront to God Himself, because every human being bears the image of God his Creator; and (3) no human being is absolutely autonomous but we are each accountable to God in the decisions we make. No wonder that in

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Judaism suicide is prohibited and assisting suicide is legally punishable in the Talmud.⁵⁴

This leads to the question of whether the God-given right to choose is a fundamental human right that allows a person to end his or her life. In this case suicide would be somewhat justified and even be a responsible action.⁵⁵ This is perhaps the strongest argument made by those who support suicide as a viable option.⁵⁶ In many cases the self-termination of one's own life is seen as an effort to confer ultimate human meaning on a life that, from one's limited human perspective, has become meaningless. We have to remember, however, that, biblically speaking, our ability to choose is never an autonomous freedom independent from or even possibly in opposition to God, but always a freedom that grows out of our relationship with God and is therefore accountable to God. Freedom misunderstood as a human act of autonomy from God leads to situations where people who are ending their lives elevate their autonomy above God in such a way that the creature is no longer accountable to the Creator anymore. In fact, this attitude of total autonomy and absolute freedom is associated with evil's origin in challenging divine authority (Isa 14:13–14). It is not the baseness of one's choice or motive that makes self-murder reprehensible or its virtuousness that would make it commendable. While God has created human beings with the capacity to choose, our freedom to decide is not virtuous in and of itself. Our human will can be used to do things God detests. Theologically speaking, the unsanctified human will is affected by sin and, thus, in bondage and in need of God's prevenient grace. Human beings were not created totally autonomous. We were created in the image of God to exist in a faithful relationship with God our Creator and Redeemer. Therefore, we are accountable to God for our decisions. The real question is not whether we have the freedom to choose, but whether we freely choose what is right in God's eyes. God, who has created life, commanded, "You shall not kill" (Exod 20:13 KJV, ASV, CEB, NABRE, NLV, NRSV). The ultimate right to determine when life should end belongs to Him. Therefore, for Christians the question of who has the final authority over life is not a question that can be determined by human beings but rests solely with God.

Suicide and the Meaning of Life

The ethical conundrums surrounding suicide are questions faced by many who suffer. Nobody likes pain. Nobody likes to suffer. Many people choose rather to end their life than to suffer.⁵⁷ They might have the impression that the world would be better off without them, and that they are only a burden. Yet the ultimate issue regarding suffering as a precursor to suicide involves more than

one's subjective feeling. It is not a matter of compassion or lack of it, but rather the realization that pain, suffering, and the course of individual lives also have spiritual dimensions that need to be taken into consideration. Suffering does not necessarily make human life meaningless or valueless. Without glorifying suffering, we need to realize that living in a fallen, sinful world necessarily includes pain and suffering as part of the human experience.⁵⁸ In suffering we can ultimately learn something from God Himself. God the Father had one Son on this earth who was without sin; yet, during this time, Jesus was not without suffering. Scripture teaches us that there may sometimes be a role for suffering in our lives (e.g., Rom 5:3; 8:17–18; 2 Cor 1:5–7; Phil 1:29). That does not mean we should not try our best to ease human suffering and eliminate suffering and pain wherever possible. It means, however, that we have to acknowledge and humbly recognize the finiteness of our abilities and our reliance upon a loving and merciful God.⁵⁹

Is Suicide the Unforgivable Sin?

When the self-destruction that takes place in the act of suicide is seen as an exercise of a supposed autonomous human being usurping sovereignty over oneself, it is not only a senseless act but also a violation of God's commandment and a repudiation of His desire that we should live.⁶⁰ As such, suicide should never be encouraged. At the same time, people who have lost a loved one through suicide should not despair or harbor shame or feelings of guilt. It is easy to believe that as a parent, spouse, partner, or friend, one might have prevented this act of suicide and therefore consider oneself somewhat guilty for that. But we need to remind ourselves that God knows every person much better than we do. While suicide is a serious and very painful act, there is only one unpardonable sin in Scripture (Matt 12:32; 1 John 5:16). Suicide is not that sin. We must refrain from judging other people's eternal destiny. Only God is omniscient. God knows, God loves, God forgives, and He desires to do everything in His power to save, and that is true also for a person who has ended life through suicide. While it would be highly doubtful that a true believer would end their life by a suicidal act, we recognize that there might be situations where even genuine believers commit rash actions,⁶¹ or where people fall under the deceptive influence of Satan's temptations, or where they are in a state of dire mental depression and confusion, and in such bewilderment might decide to take their own life. God knows all those circumstances and the factors that might lead a person to such a terrible decision. A Christian who regularly exhibits love, could, in a moment of weakness, carry out an irrational act of despair in an uncharacteristic fashion, and take one's own

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life. It may be that such an act would not characterize their overall life trajectory and behavior toward God. Ellen G. White recognized this important spiritual aspect: “The character is revealed by the works, not by occasional good deeds and occasional misdeeds, but by the tendency of the habitual words and acts.”⁶²

The knowledge of the sacredness of human life and God’s desire to sustain it and guard it by prohibiting us from ending it should always be balanced with the fact of God’s goodness, omniscience, and desire to save and forgive. While every suicidal death is tragic, and no suicide should ever occur, we must remember that God sees things we do not see; He knows the heart, He knows the totality of every human life, and, in His love, He wants to save every human being. Therefore, we do well to remember that God who loves the suicidal person much more than anyone in this world is also the very one who will make the final judgment. This is the only, yet very real, comfort we can have when we are confronted with the tragic reality of a death by suicide.

Endnotes

1 B. Harris, “Suicide,” in *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology*, ed. David J. Atkinson and David H. Field (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995), 825, defines “suicide” as “the intentional taking of his or her own life by the person involved” Similarly, D. B. Fletcher, “Suicide,” in *Encyclopedia of Biblical and Christian Ethics*, ed. R. K. Harrison (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1987), 398, writes, “Suicide is the deliberate taking of one’s own life.” Gary Stewart, *Basic Questions on Suicide and Euthanasia: Are They Ever Right?*, BioBasics (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1998), 11, has said, “At its most basic level, suicide is the act of voluntarily and intentionally killing oneself.” D. Needham, “Suicide,” in *Baker Encyclopedia of Psychology & Counseling*, ed. David G. Benner and Peter C. Hill, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 1182, who defines suicide as “the deliberate taking of one’s own life,” goes on to say, “Suicide violates the Sixth Commandment and is therefore a sin, usurping God’s control over life and death.” Whether the autonomous decision to end one’s life is self-imposed or whether the choice to end one’s life is accomplished with assistance, the deliberate taking of one’s life is to be distinguished from the willing surrender and self-sacrifice of one’s life—for instance, in the performance of one’s duty in military service or in defense of a person unjustly attacked or in times of persecution. In the latter instances, the person does not primarily or directly will their own death, but they are prepared to accept it as the unavoidable consequence of their performing some act of charity, justice, mercy, or piety. See Thomas Wood, “Suicide,” in *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Ethics*, ed. James F. Childress and John Macquarrie (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1986), 609; and the discussion in A. A. Howsepian, “Some Reservations About Suicide,” in *Suicide: A Christian Response: Crucial Considerations for Choosing Life*, ed. Timothy J. Demy and Gary P. Stewart (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1998), 297–310, esp. 300–301.

2 According to the International Association of Suicide Prevention, over one in every one hundred deaths (1.3%) in 2019 were the results of suicide (“Global Suicide Statistics,” International Association of Suicide Prevention, <https://www.iasp.info/wspd/references/> [accessed January 17, 2024]). Worldwide, more than seven hundred thousand people die of suicide every year. The World Health Organization (WHO) has stated that suicide occurs so frequently that it should be recognized as a public health priority. We should keep in mind that for every suicide there are many more people who attempt suicide, which makes the risk group even greater. According to the WHO, suicide is the fourth leading cause of death among fifteen- to twenty-nine-year-olds (“Suicide,” fact sheet, World Health Organization, <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/suicide> [accessed January 17, 2024]), which makes young people in their formative years a

particularly vulnerable group. According to the Center of Disease Control and Prevention in the United States, the suicide rate of males in 2021 was approximately four times higher than the rates among females (<https://www.cdc.gov/suicide/facts/data.html> [accessed: January 17, 2024]). Seventy-seven percent of global suicides occur in low- and middle-income countries (ibid.; for detailed statistical information about suicide rates in different countries, see “Suicide Rates,” World Health Organization, <https://www.who.int/data/gho/data/themes/mental-health/suicide-rates> [accessed January, 17, 2024]). 3 Robert D. Orr, “The Physician-Assisted Suicide: Is it Ever Justified?,” in Demy and Stewart, 63.

4 It has been pointed out that the choices one makes are determined by the worldview that is adopted and by our understanding of what a person is. John D. Morgan, “Death, Attitudes Toward,” in *Encyclopedia of Bioethics*, ed. Warren Thomas Reich (New York: Simon & Schuster MacMillan, 1995), 525.

5 We human beings with our limited knowledge do not know what will happen to the one who has died by suicide; only God knows. But our life is sacred and immeasurably important to God and belongs to Him. We can carry all our burdens to God. There is no burden so heavy that He cannot carry.

6 This article cannot provide professional support. In case you are contemplating to end your life please connect with people who are professionally trained in relating to those with suicidal thoughts. For a list of professional suicide crisis emergency intervention and support centers, see “Get Help & Support for Suicide,” Google Search Help, <https://support.google.com/websearch/answer/11181469> (accessed May 1, 2024). From a Seventh-day Adventist perspective, see Jennifer Jill Schwirzer, “Facing the Specter of Suicide,” *Adventist Review*, January 3, 2017, <https://adventistreview.org/magazine-article/facing-the-specter-of-suicide/> (accessed May 1, 2024); Bernard Davy, Carlos Fayard, and Peter Landless, “Preventing Suicide,” *Adventist Review*, January 3, 2017, <https://adventistreview.org/magazine-article/preventing-suicide/> (accessed May 1, 2024); and Torben Bergland, “Suicide and Suffering,” *Adventist Review*, September 4, 2023, <https://adventistreview.org/magazine-article/suicide-and-suffering/> (accessed May 1, 2024). 7 Neither the term “Trinity” nor the term “incarnation” are found in the biblical text, yet the concepts expressed by both are present in the Bible. Hence, the absence of a certain term does not indicate the absence of a reality that is present, nevertheless.

8 Lewis B. Smedes, *Mere Morality: What God Expects From Ordinary People* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 111.

9 Howsepian, 310.

10 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, ed. Ilse Tödt et al., trans. Reinhard Krauss, Charles C. West, and Douglas W. Stott, vol. 6 of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005), 196. Similarly, Ulrich Eibach, *Medizin und Menschenwürde: Ethische Probleme in der Medizin aus christlicher Sicht* (Wuppertal: R. Brockhaus Verlag, 1988), 214.

11 <https://www.cdc.gov/suicide/facts/data.html> (accessed: January 17, 2024). In Japan (a shame society), many young adults commit suicide at the university level for not performing as well as expected; e.g., Stephanie Lu, “The Mystery Behind Japan’s High Suicide Rates Among Kids,” *The Wilson Quarterly*, n.d., https://www.wilsonquarterly.com/quarterly/_/the-mystery-behind-japans-high-suicide-rates-among-kids (accessed June 24, 2024).

12 See Amanda Montell, *Cultish: The Language of Fanaticism* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2021), 77.

13 The tragic experience of the suicidal deaths of cult members like Jonestown or Heaven’s Gate are sad illustrations of this danger. See ibid., 77–87.

14 Suicide is especially high among young adults; see “Youth Suicide Rates Increased During the COVID-19 Pandemic,” National Institute of Mental Health, May 22, 2023, <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/news/science-news/2023/youth-suicide-rates-increased-during-the-covid-19-pandemic> (accessed June 11, 2024).

15 See the statement “The Love of God Compels Us: A Statement of the Biblical Research Institute Ethics Committee on the Humanitarian Crisis of Refugees, Migrants and Displaced People,” *Reflections* 74 (May 2021): 8–10.

16 Margaret Pabst Battin, “Suicide,” in *Encyclopedia of Bioethics*, ed. Warren Thomas Reich (New York: Simon & Schuster MacMillan, 1995), 5:2444.

17 Harris, 826.

18 For a Seventh-day Adventist perspective about creation and God as our Creator, see William H. Shea, “Creation,” in *Handbook of Seventh-Day*

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- Adventist Theology, ed. Raoul Dederen, Commentary Reference Series 12 (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000), 418–456.
- 19 Wood, 353.
- 20 On the meaning of the sixth commandment, see the helpful discussion in Jiri Moskala, “You Shall Not Kill” or “You Shall Not Murder”? The Meaning of Ratsakh in the Sixth Commandment,” *Reflections* 67 (July 2019): 1–7.
- 21 Fletcher, 398.
- 22 Of course, human beings have enormous value and God prizes them above all the earth. But when we try to calculate the worth of a human being, we start down a dangerous path of comparing the value and worth of others which can quickly lead to merely utilitarian decisions. See the discussion in Smedes, 104–107.
- 23 For a concise discussion of relevant biblical passages, see Ángel Rodríguez, “Self-Killing in Scripture,” *Adventist Review*, September 22, 2023, <https://adventistreview.org/magazine-article/self-killing-in-scripture/> (accessed May 1, 2024).
- 24 Eugene H. Merrill, “Suicide and the Concept of Death in the Old Testament,” in Demy and Stewart, 323. From this fact Merrill has concluded that “undoubtedly a general reverence for life, fear of death and its aftermath, and the self-evident inability to repent of suicide may be contributing factors in the apparently low incidence of suicide” in the Old Testament (*ibid.*).
- 25 Margaret Pabst Battin, *The Least Worst Death: Essays in Bioethics on the End of Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 207, claims that “there is no explicit prohibition of suicide in the Bible. . . . Nor is there any passage in either the Old or New Testament that can be directly understood as an explicit prohibition of suicide.” Others, like James T. Clemons also assert that “the lack of any specific condemnation of suicide leads us to conclude that the biblical writers simply gave no serious thought to the issue” (James T. Clemons, *What Does the Bible Say About Suicide?* [Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1990], 71). Likewise, Arthur J. Droge and James D. Tabor, *A Noble Death: Suicide and Martyrdom Among Christians and Jews in Antiquity* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 125, maintain that “the New Testament expresses no condemnation of voluntary death.” Even anti-suicide scholars assert that the Bible does not explicitly address the moral rightness or wrongness of suicide (Darrel W. Amundson, *Medicine, Society, and Faith in the Ancient and Medieval Worlds* [Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1996], 70).
- 26 In the discussion of the biblical material, we are heavily indebted to Jeffrey Adams Moore and his presentation “Suicide in the Bible: The Ethical Dilemma Over the Lack of a Legal Prohibition,” which was given at the Evangelical Theological Society 75th Annual Meeting in San Antonio, TX, November 15, 2023. His presentation is taken from his PhD dissertation “Greater Sins: Are Certain Violations of God’s Moral Law Weightier Than Others?” (Midwest Baptist Theological Seminary, 2022).
- 27 Dale Ralph Davis, *2 Samuel: Out of Every Adversity*, Focus on the Bible (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2001), 14, argues, “The solution is simple: the Amalekite lied. If you ever have a choice between the [biblical] narrator and an Amalekite, always believe the narrator. . . . There is a suspicious hole in the Amalekite’s story. . . . it is not likely that Saul would have been so isolated in the thick of the battle. . . . that he had to depend on an Amalekite.” See also David Toshio Tsumura, *First Book of Samuel*, New International Commentary of the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 651.
- 28 Ralph W. Klein, *1 Samuel*, 2nd ed., Word Biblical Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 288.
- 29 Dónal P. O’Mathúna, “But the Bible Doesn’t Say They Were Wrong to Commit Suicide, Does It?,” in Demy and Stewart, 358, emphasis original.
- 30 *Ibid.*
- 31 *Ibid.*, 359, emphasis original. See also Edwin M. Good, *Irony in the Old Testament* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1965), 30–33.
- 32 O’Mathúna, 359.
- 33 Robert D. Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel*, New American Commentary 7 (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 282.
- 34 So Davis, 218.
- 35 So Bergen, 415; see also Tsumura, 254.
- 36 Bergen, 416.
- 37 Walter A. Maier III, *1 Kings 12–22*, Concordia Commentary: A Theological Exposition of Sacred Scripture (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 2019), 1268, also lists some other possible motives.
- 38 Paul R. House, *1, 2 Kings*, New American Commentary 8 (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 201.
- 39 Iain W. Provan, *1 and 2 Kings*, New International Biblical Commentary 7 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 129.
- 40 It has been pointed out that his plea that God would remember him is significant. Remembrance is a very significant motif in the Old Testament, beginning with the promise made by God after the flood. See Barry G. Webb, *The Book of Judges*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012, 413).
- 41 For a similar theological assessment, see Wayne Grudem, *Christian Ethics: An Introduction to Biblical Moral Reasoning* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 609. Margaret Pabst Battin, who endorses the legitimacy of suicide, concludes differently, and thinks that Samson’s death was suicide; see Battin, *Least Worst Death*, 208.
- 42 Daniel I. Block, *Judges, Ruth*, New American Commentary 6 (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 467–469.
- 43 Craig Blomberg, *Matthew*, New American Commentary 22 (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1992), 407. Blomberg observes that the verb *metamelomai* could theoretically designate genuine heartfelt repentance as in the case of the believing tax collectors and prostitutes of Jesus’s day (Matt 21:32). However, the context of Matthew 27 shows that this verb does not connote such in the case of Judas. See also similarly Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 695; and R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 1039.
- 44 Grant R. Osborne, *Matthew*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 1011.
- 45 Merrill, 324.
- 46 Not every case of suicide that is committed is necessarily the culmination of a life that has completely turned away from God. In a sinful and fallen human world, people can experience indescribable levels of physical and mental pain and despair that can result in the dire decision to end one’s life. Yet, the act of ending one’s life is never endorsed or commended in the Bible.
- 47 Moore, 13–14.
- 48 Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 540, has noted that “the jailor’s reaction, however, reflects ancient values of shame and honor, since the jailor and his superiors might see the incident as a dereliction of duty.” John B. Polhill, *Acts*, New American Commentary 26 (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1992), 355, has pointed out that if prisoners escaped from a jail, the prison guard could be subject to execution for his negligence.
- 49 Moore, 14.
- 50 Cf. F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, rev. ed., The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 317.
- 51 Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1983), 164–165.
- 52 Smedes, 111.
- 53 *Ibid.*, 110.
- 54 “Correspondence,” *First Things*, (no. 78, 1997): 4.
- 55 See discussion in Smedes, 112. Smedes concludes that “the Judeo-Christian ethic rejects this [option]. The Sixth Commandment prevents us at the very least from making suicide morally neutral” (*ibid.*).
- 56 See Battin, “Suicide,” 5:2444–2450; and Battin, *Least Worst Death*.
- 57 Smedes, 115–117, calls this suicide of despair or suicide of escape.
- 58 See the discussion in Alister E. McGrath, “The Price of Life,” in Demy and Stewart, 140–144.
- 59 Orr, 68.
- 60 Karl Barth has pointed this out in his monumental *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 3, bk. 4, *The Doctrine of Creation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2004): 404–405.
- 61 Such as Jephthah pledging to offer the first thing that walks out of his house as a sacrifice to the Lord (Judg 11:29–40), which turns out to be his own daughter.
- 62 Ellen G. White, *Signs of the Times*, March 27, 1884, para. 12. Barth, 405, has pointed out that “the opinion that it alone [i.e., suicide] is unforgivable rests on the false view that the last will and act of man in time, because they are the last and take place as it were on the very threshold of eternity, are authoritatively and conclusively decisive for his eternal destiny and God’s verdict on him. But this cannot be said of any isolated will or act of man, and therefore not even of the last. God sees and weighs the whole of human life. He judges the heart. And He judges it according to His own righteousness which is that of mercy. He thus judges the content of the last hour in the context of the whole.”

Different Translations and the Greek Text of 1 Corinthians 9:5

Ekkehardt Mueller

It is a great privilege to read and try to understand and interpret a biblical text. One of the crucial steps is to go back to the text in the original languages. If one does not know Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek, one should consult a number of translations in order to notice differences and be alerted to the fact that it is possible to translate a term or phrase differently or that another reason may be causing the differences in translation.

In 1 Corinthians 9 an interesting text is found. The ESV provides the following translation: “Do we not have the right to take along a believing wife, as do the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas?” NASB, NIV, and NKJV translate the text very similarly.

Context

The Larger Context

Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians deals with the issue of liberty. The believers in Corinth understood that the gospel of Christ had indeed set them free. In Christ they were liberated from the realm of sin, from the law as a supposed way to salvation, from eternal death, receiving all the privileges that belong to salvation—a wonderful and new situation. In his second letter to the Corinthians Paul stressed that those who are in Christ are a new creation (2 Cor 5:17).

But the believers in Corinth had taken Christian liberty too far. They made themselves dependent on various teachers and allowed for division in the church. A process of alienation had taken place. In addition, they allowed for sexual immorality in the church. On top of this, they had created a class distinction between the rich and the poor. The rich had their meals before the Lord’s Supper, and the poor went hungry. So Paul felt he had to address the problem and explain what it means for Christians to be free.

The Immediate Context

In 1 Corinthians 9:1 he begins by saying, “Am I not free? Am I not an apostle?” In verse 4 and 5 he continues: “Do we not have the right to eat and drink? Do we not have the right to take along a believing wife, as do the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas?” The questions demands a positive answer, although he has not used all of his rights.

Finally, he explains, Christian freedom has limitations in spite of all its privileges (1 Cor 9:19–22). True Christian freedom means not to be enslaved by one’s own ego. Paul is willing to adapt to many different persons in order to save them or help them mature spiritually, but without abandoning his convictions. So his Christian freedom allows him to serve, live under difficult circumstances, and love others who may not be so lovable at first glance.

In this connection Paul talks about the freedom to have a believing wife, one of the privileges that he did not claim. While under certain circumstances it is good to be single, Paul also makes it clear that it is good to be married “in the Lord” (1 Cor 7:39).

Analysis of the Text

Christians and Marriage

It is very clear that the early apostles were married. Peter was married, as were the brothers of Jesus, James, and Jude. Marriage is one of the remnants of paradise still with us, and it is designed to be a paradise on earth. It is God’s wish for the majority of humanity to be married. Paul was an exception. He had the gift of celibacy. This freedom also has a limitation. Translations talk about a believing wife, not just any wife. However, this limitation can also be a great blessing, as God’s commandments always are.

Translation of 1 Corinthians 9:5

While the previously mentioned translations reflect the intention of the original text, they have not translated the text literally. A literal translation reads: “Do we not have the right to take along *a sister*, a wife . . . ?” That means Paul as well as all Christians have the privilege to live with a sister as wife. Yet Paul is not talking about incest or related issues. He does not mean a biological sister, but a spiritual sister.

Sisters in the New Testament

The term “sister” appears a number of times in the New Testament (twenty-six times). It describes mostly literal sisters—that is, biological sisters (about sixteen times). For example, Lazarus was ill, and his sisters Mary

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and Martha sent to Jesus, their friend, so that He would come and heal their brother (John 11:1, 3, 5, 28, 39).

However, the noun “sister” is also used metaphorically. In this case it describes a female follower of Christ. Those who are doing Jesus’s will are His brothers and sisters (Matt 12:50). In some cases, Jesus’s disciples may have to leave father and mother, because after becoming Christians they are sometimes rejected by their own relatives. But Jesus promises that, instead, they will “receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life” (Mark 10:30). Phoebe and Apphia are sisters of the believers (Rom 16:1; Phlm 1:2). Younger female church members should not be rebuked when something goes wrong but should be encouraged as *sisters* (1 Tim 2:5). “If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food” (Jas 2:15), he or she needs to be taken care of. They are “family” members in the Lord.

So, followers of Christs are indeed rich and blessed. They have hundreds and thousands of sisters, sisters in Christ. These are as real sisters as biological sisters are—sometimes even more so.

Brothers in the New Testament

The term “brother” is found much more frequently in the New Testament than sisters (343 times), but, as stated, “sisters” are mentioned too and not only subsumed under the inclusive term “brother.” While brothers in the New Testament can be biological brothers, mostly they are believers. The plural does not distinguish between males and females, but covers “all the children of a family, both male and female.”¹ “Thus modern Eng. Versions often render it ‘brothers and sisters,’” unless the context requires it to be limited to males.²

The term “brother” in a spiritual sense appears about 260 times in the New Testament,³ the term “resurrection” (*anastasis*) about forty times, and the term *agape*, “love,” about 120 times. We have to add to the noun *agapē* the verb “to love” (*agapaō*) and the adjective “beloved” (*agapētos*) to surpass “brother,” “sister,” and “brotherhood.”⁴ In other words, the New Testament strongly emphasizes the brotherly and sisterly relationship of the believers. The term “brother” appears in all New Testament books with the exception of 2 John, where one finds “sister.”

“But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers” (Matt 23:8). After the Jerusalem Council the delegates sent out a letter: “The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the brothers who are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings” (Acts 15:23). Onesimus is no longer to be regarded as a slave but as “beloved brother” (Phlm 1:16). The brotherhood and sisterhood of Christ’s

followers is not just a present reality, but it extends back to the apostles: “I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance” (Rev 1:9).

Brotherhood reaches its climax in Jesus whose brothers and sisters we were honored to become: Jesus is “the firstborn among many brothers” (Rom 8:29). He states, “For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother” (Mark 3:35).

He [Jesus] is not ashamed to call them brothers, saying, “I will tell of your name to my brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise.” . . . Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. For surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham. Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. (Heb 2:11–17)

As one scholar has noted, “because Jesus became our brother, we are brothers and sisters of one another. The ruling principle in this relationship is love.”⁵

The Family of God

With Jesus something very important has happened: the foundation of His church, which actually is His family, is a brotherhood and sisterhood. It is true that the Israelites occasionally called themselves brothers. But with His church Jesus went way beyond this concept. His family is no longer a nation. It surpasses all boundaries between humans beings, including race, class, and social ranking. Jewish Christians are now brothers and sisters of Gentile Christians and vice versa. Christian men and women are brothers and sisters, as are slaves and their owners. This is the miracle and mystery of Christ’s church.

But today this concept has to be recovered. As time goes by and the church is growing, believers tend to forget that they are brothers and sisters. Fortunately, one can still experience brotherly and sisterly kindness, thoughtfulness, and love in Christ’s church. Marcus Minucius Felix, who died around AD 250 in Rome, defended Christianity in his apology *Octavius*, in which a dialogue on Christianity takes place between the pagan Caecilius Natalis and the Christian Octavius Januarius.

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He writes, “They [the Christians] love one another almost before they know one another.”⁶

Application: What “Sister” Expresses

The terms “brother” and “sister” express closeness and intimacy. These terms picture a loving family as God had intended it to be when He created Adam and Eve. My wife is my “sister.” Your wife is your “sister.”

Typically, biological brothers do not need to be told to protect their biological sisters and care for them. When Dinah was raped, her brothers avenged her (Gen 34). That may not have been the best way to deal with the issue, but they cared for their sister. The same with Absalom. When Tamar was violated and then rejected, humiliated, and hated by Amnon, Absalom, her brother, found out, took her in his house, and paid Amnon back (2 Sam 13). While the last step is not a Christian way to deal with the issue, Absalom still cared for his sister. Normally, brothers care for their sisters. Sisters also take care of their brothers, especially if they are younger brothers.

This is the case also in the church, which is called “the household of faith” (Gal 6:10) and “the household of God” (Eph 2:19; 1 Tim 3:15; 1 Pet 4:17). Therefore, one cannot get rid of brothers and sisters, whether biological or spiritual, unless we separate from the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. So indifference is not an option; neither is divorce. But there is to be respect, attention, a compliment here and there, time for conversation, a little gift—in short: love. Christian couples need to cultivate their human union and their spiritual union. Husband and wife are spiritual siblings, members of the family of Christ as is the entire community of believers.

Summary

In the enterprise of trying to understand better Scripture, God, and His will, a knowledge of the biblical languages is helpful. It can open doors of understanding that are otherwise closed. It can help us get excited about insights and nuances that otherwise may be missed.

However, only a few Christians have the privilege of understanding the biblical languages. For those who do not have such access, a look at different translations can be very helpful. The “believing wife” (ESV, CSB, NASB, NET, NIV, NKJV, NRSV), or “a wife who believes” (CEB), or “a Christian wife” (NAB, NJB, NLT) is the husband’s “sister” (KJV, MIT, The Voice, TNT, WEB, YLT) in Christ. While the phrase “believing wife” and its variants express what the text in 1 Corinthians 9:5 means, it may miss the aspect of affection and fondness, the bond of love that is expressed through the term “sister” and that is so important for marriage and relationships in the church. However, we are not suggesting that the

preceding translations should be dismissed. We only argue that by being mindful of the fact that the Greek text uses the term “sister,” our understanding of a Christian wife may be broadened by revealing a closeness, an intimacy, and aspects of multilevel relations that followers of Christ today may need to hear about again. At the same time, marriage is not only an individualistic covenant between husband and wife, but has also a larger dimension as it is incorporated into the community of believers, the family of God.

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Endnotes

These and more may be found at “Official Statements,” Seventh-day Adventist Church, <https://www.adventist.org/official-statements/> (accessed March 11, 2024); and “Seventh-day Adventist Guidelines for Navigating High-Impact Topics and Situations,” Seventh-day Adventist Church, <https://www.adventist.org/beliefs/guidelines/> (accessed March 11, 2024).

1 Moisés Silva, ed., *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 149.

2 Ibid., 151.

3 “Brother,” “sister,” and “brotherhood for believers” are found about 270 times altogether.

4 The number of all three “love” terms, taken together, add up to about 320 in the New Testament.

5 Silva, 151.

6 Minucius Felix, Octavius, trans. R. E. Wallis, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing, 1887), 4:177–178.



Lessons from Matthew 27

Clinton Wahlen

Matthew 27 begins with a brief description of the Jewish leaders reassembling in the morning to ratify the death sentence already agreed upon and to plan how they might persuade Pilate to charge Jesus with a capital offense. In much more detail is the account of Judas feeling remorse, throwing his reward for the betrayal in the temple, and going out to hang himself (27:1–10). Next narrated is Jesus’s trial before Pilate, Pilate’s offer to release one of the prisoners, and the crowd’s choice of Barabbas over Jesus, demanding that Jesus be crucified (27:11–23). Pilate then delivers Him to be crucified, Jesus is mocked and humiliated by the soldiers, and the events connected with the crucifixion are described in quick succession: Simon of Cyrene is forced to carry His cross; Jesus refuses the wine mixed with gall; lots are cast for His clothing; the placard specifying the charge is placed over His head; He is blasphemed, mocked, and reviled; and His final hours are described (27:24–50). Through it all, Matthew, like the other Gospels, chronicles how these things fulfill prophecy and several supernatural events convey to onlookers that Jesus is “truly . . . the Son of God” (27:51–54). The chapter concludes with a description of the crucial parts played by certain women and Joseph of Arimathea, followed by the chief priests and Pharisees arranging with Pilate for a Roman guard to be stationed at the tomb (27:55–66).

Interpretation of Matthew 27

1. Verses 1-10

- Matthew’s description of the daytime trial is encapsulated in just one verse, probably because it primarily concerns how to wring from Pilate a death sentence for Jesus. Binding Him signifies condemnation by the Sanhedrin.
- Pilate’s title of *hēgemōn* (“governor”) is the Greek equivalent of the Latin *praefectus*,¹ which has been confirmed by an inscription found near the theater in Caesarea Maritima on the Mediterranean coast where Pilate spent most of his time.
- During major Jewish festivals Pilate would be in Jerusalem with a large contingency of Roman soldiers in case trouble should arise.
- Judas, apparently surprised Jesus allowed Himself to be condemned to death, is “seized with remorse” (v. 3, NIV), returns the thirty pieces of silver, and confesses too late his betrayal of an innocent man.

However, having served the murderous designs of the Jewish leaders, they coldly respond in effect, “That is your problem, not ours.”

- Disgusted with them, Judas throws the “blood money” (v. 6, ESV) onto the floor of the temple, which would have resulted in the temple’s defilement through the transfer of blood guilt associated with the shedding of innocent blood.²
- The priests recognize the problem of defilement due to blood guilt being attached to the money, preventing them from putting it into the temple treasury, so, instead, they purchase a field to bury foreigners in—an act seemingly pious, except the name given to it, “Field of Blood” (*Akeldama*, Acts 1:19, ESV), memorializes their diabolical deed.³
- Matthew’s prophetic reference combines material from Jeremiah (cited as the major prophet) and Zechariah. Israel’s rejection of a faithful shepherd (Zech 11:12–13) underscores the paltry sum at which Jesus is valued by both Judas and the chief priests. Jeremiah’s mention of the potter (Jer 18:2–12; 19:1–15) and the field (Jer 32:6–9) speak respectively of God’s judgment on Israel and hope for its restoration.

2. Verses 11-23

- Jesus’s trial before Pilate is described only very briefly in the Synoptics, but according to John it takes place in the Praetorium, which the Jewish leaders refuse to enter “lest they should be defiled” (John 18:28). It is now generally considered to have been within the lavish Western palace,⁴ which was located not far from the temple near the Jaffa Gate.⁵
- Pilate’s key question to Jesus, “Are You the King of the Jews?” is preserved verbatim in all four Gospels (cf. Mark 15:2; Luke 23:3; John 18:33) and, in Greek, suggests Pilate, seeing Jesus’s calm, dignified appearance, is surprised by the charge leveled against Him.
- Jesus’s oblique answer to the question, though construed by His accusers as claiming the title (Matt 26:63–64), was apparently not understood by Pilate as self-incriminating since he pronounces Jesus innocent (Matt 27:23–24; cf. Luke 23:22; John 18:38).
- Pilate marvels at Jesus’s silence in the face of the serious charges brought against Him, which mirrors His deportment before the high priest (Matt 26:62) and prevents anything He might say being used

against Him. It also corresponds to the refusal to speak by the suffering Servant of Isaiah (Isa 53:7).

- Barabbas means “son of the father” in Aramaic, suggesting he may have been a messianic pretender like those Jesus warned of (Matt 24:5). He was imprisoned for murder and insurrection (Mark 15:7; Luke 23:19), and his following may have included the two criminals who were crucified with Jesus.
- The “judgment seat” (Gk. *bēma*) is a platform measuring about one square yard outside the palace on which a throne was placed with steps leading up to it. The dream of his wife likely causes him to try to avoid condemning Jesus to death (which the release of a prisoner might achieve), because dreams in the ancient world were often regarded as revelatory—just as those previously mentioned have been (see Matt 1:20; 2:12–13, 19, 22).
- Although Jesus is innocent and Pilate proclaims Him so (v. 24), the religious leaders have primed the people to choose Barabbas and have Jesus crucified.
- Throughout this chapter Matthew especially emphasizes Jesus’s messianic mission: Pilate repeatedly presents Him before the people as “the Christ” (vv. 17, 22); he and others refer to Jesus as “the King of the Jews” (vv. 11, 29, 37) and “the King of Israel” (v. 42). Though sometimes spoken in mockery, they bear ironic witness to Jesus’s true identity.
- All four Gospels record Pilate’s unwillingness to put an innocent man to death, particularly by means of such a cruel punishment as crucifixion (Mark 15:14; Luke 23:22–23; John 18:38–40), but also the crowd’s insistence. Seeing “a tumult was rising” and fearing losing control of the situation, Pilate capitulates, attempting to disavow any responsibility for an innocent man’s death by washing his hands (Matt 27:24; cf. Deut 21:1–9; Pss 26:6; 73:13). But he has been given political and military authority over Judea and the Jews cannot put Jesus to death without his order (John 18:31), which Pilate ultimately gives (v. 26; Mark 15:15; Luke 23:24–25; John 19:16).

3. Verses 25–50

- One of the most problematic verses in the New Testament is the so-called “self-curse” (“His blood be on us and on our children”) that has been (mis) used through the centuries to justify anti-Semitism. However, taken at face value, it only involves those directly crying out for Jesus’s crucifixion and their children. “It is primarily these who would suffer the calamities mentioned in [Matthew] 24:15–19 when Roman armies would lay siege to Jerusalem and ultimately destroy it.”⁶ Also, it is important to remember that many Jews had accepted Jesus prior

to His crucifixion and continued to do so after His death and resurrection (see, e.g., Acts 2:40–41; 4:4; 6:7; 14:1). All are invited to accept Jesus and be saved, including Jews (Rom 1:16), “for God shows no partiality” (Rom 2:11, ESV).

- Saying Jesus’s “blood be on us” was a common Jewish way of accepting responsibility for a person’s death (Lev 20:9; Jos 2:19; Jer 26:15, etc.). Thus, verse 25 is not a blanket curse on all Jews but shows the responsibility that adheres to “this wicked generation” (Matt 12:45; 16:4).
- The additional order to have Jesus “scourged” was one that frequently preceded a person’s crucifixion. It involved being tied to a post and whipped with knotted leather cords embedded with metal, glass, or rocks, thus severely lacerating the skin and which could by itself be fatal.
- Roman soldiers frequently entertained themselves with games and on this occasion they amuse themselves by dressing Jesus as a king, using a scarlet cloak, crowning Him with thorns, handing him a reed, and mockingly bowing before Him with a salute similar to that which they would give to Caesar. Matthew’s readers would recognize the irony in that Jesus is the true King (cf. Matt 2:2) deserving homage above the emperor.
- Simon of Cyrene, according to Mark 15:21, is “the father of Alexander and Rufus” (cf. Rom 16:13). The city of Cyrene, located in what is now Libya, had a significant Jewish population. Since Jerusalem had a Cyrenian Jewish synagogue, Simon had probably come to celebrate the Passover with his sons. Apparently, following the scourging and loss of blood, Jesus is now too weak to carry the crossbeam of the cross (weighing about thirty to forty pounds) all the way to Golgotha, so the Roman soldiers compel Simon to carry it (cf. Mark 15:21).
- There are two competing locations identified as Golgotha (deriving from the Aramaic word for “skull”) or Calvary (its Latin equivalent, *calvaria*, Luke 23:33): near the Garden Tomb just outside the Damascus Gate on the north side of Jerusalem (which would fit a trial before Pilate in the Antonia Fortress) or the traditional site at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher (which fits better a trial in the Western Palace as previously suggested).
- Archeological evidence also favors the traditional site: (1) in the time of Jesus it was located outside the city wall (cf. Heb 13:12); (2) its location near a stone quarry made it a likely thoroughfare for passersby such as Simon; (3) it had been used as a garden but also began to be used as a cemetery (John 19:41); (4) designs of tombs in the area fit a first-century burial and a “new tomb” (Matt 27:60)—unlike the Garden

Tomb, which, nevertheless, is useful for visualizing what Golgotha with a nearby tomb looked like.

- Jesus is offered an alcoholic concoction to relieve the pain. Gall and vinegar are mentioned in Psalm 69:21 as given to David, foreshadowing Jesus's sufferings on the cross as the Son of David. Once Jesus tastes the wine, though, He refuses it so as not to compromise His spiritual discernment.
- Crucifixion was used systematically in Judea by the Romans to discourage rebellion against their authority. It was horrifically painful because the nails pierced nerves in the hands and feet. But death was slow because there was little bleeding and no immediate damage to vital organs.⁷ Eventually, exhaustion would make it impossible to raise oneself up using the arms and feet, and the person died by asphyxiation.
- An ossuary containing the bones of a crucified man with an iron nail piercing his right foot was discovered in 1968, confirming the gospel account that Jesus was nailed to the cross (John 20:25).
- The charge ("The King of the Jews"), which according to Roman practice was written on a placard and placed above the condemned person's head, appears in all four Gospels (cf. Mark 15:26; Luke 23:38; John 19:19).
- Jesus is placed in the center (cf. Isa 53:12), where Barabbas would have been as leader of an insurrection.
- Three groups of scoffers are mentioned: (1) passersby who wag their heads (cf. Ps 22:7), repeat the false accusations made against Jesus (cf. Matt 26:60-61), and call on Him to prove He is the Son of God (cf. Matt 4:3, 6)—which He could not do and still save human beings; (2) the chief priests, scribes, and elders who in their mockery ironically speak the truth—"He saved others; Himself He cannot save"—calling Him "the King of Israel" (Matt 27:42); and (3) the two "robbers" (the Greek word could also mean "insurrectionists") who are said to have reviled Him similarly.
- An eerie, supernatural darkness settles over the scene during what would ordinarily be the brightest time of the day (noon to three p.m.). It could not have resulted from a solar eclipse, which requires a new moon, because Passover occurs when the moon is full.⁸
- Jesus's "cry" of being forsaken (cf. Ps 22:1) uses a Greek word (*anaboaō*) that appears only here in the New Testament and signifies "grief or astonishment."⁹ Jesus takes upon Himself the punishment for sin (Matt 20:28), is forsaken by the Father, and suffers the equivalent of eternal death for all humankind. How the infinite, eternal, immortal God could

nevertheless suffer this way is an incomprehensible mystery, but it can be grasped by faith.

- Jesus's final cry (Gk. *krazō*), unlike the first, was loud and authoritative. Although what Jesus says is not recorded by Matthew, according to John Jesus says, "It is finished!" (John 19:30), and Luke records Jesus' last words as, "Father, 'into Your hands I commit My spirit'" (Luke 23:46, quoting Ps 31:5). Thus, Jesus voluntarily gives up His life rather than it being taken from Him (John 10:18).
- Jesus's death is followed by a series of supernatural signs (Matt 27:51-53): the heavy veil between the two apartments of the temple is torn in two by an unseen hand, signifying God's judgment and that its purpose had come to an end with type meeting antitype; an earthquake splits open the rock-hewn tombs (like those that can be seen today on the Mount of Olives); and many "saints" are resurrected and appear "to many" after Jesus is resurrected.
- Jesus's death, attended as it was by signs on earth and in the heavens, moves the centurion and others with Him to recognize in some way His divine character as "the Son of God."

5. Verses 55-66

- At the cross Matthew provides the first clear indication that many of Jesus's followers were women who ministered to Him, financially (cf. Luke 8:3) and, perhaps, by providing other support (e.g., food). Interestingly, the mother of Jesus is not mentioned (but cf. John 19:25-27), while two other Marys are (cf. Mark 15:40, 47; 16:1).
- Mary Magdalene is mentioned first, recognizing her as the most important of the three. Jesus had delivered her from seven demons (Luke 8:2). She was first to the tomb on Sunday morning, and also the first to report the empty tomb to the other disciples (John 20:1-2). Two mothers were also there: "Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of Zebedee's sons" (Matt 27:56).
- While Matthew notes Joseph of Arimathea's wealth, he was also an important member of the Sanhedrin who was "waiting for the kingdom of God" (Mark 15:43), "a good and just man," who "had not consented" to the council's condemnation of Jesus (Luke 23:50-51). That Matthew indicates he has "become a disciple of Jesus" (Matt 27:57) means he knows the teachings of Jesus and is willing to sacrifice his own reputation for the sake of the kingdom of heaven (Matt 16:24-25).¹⁰
- His attending to the body of Jesus is not only in accordance with Jewish piety in providing for an unattended or abandoned corpse; it may also fall to the Jewish court that condemned Jesus to death

Lessons from Matthew 27

to ensure His proper burial (Deut 21:22–23; cf. John 19:31).¹¹

- Joseph's lending his own personal tomb for the burial fulfills the prophecy that Jesus would make His grave "with the rich at His death" (Isa 53:9). Although the eleven disciples are not present, the two Marys note the tomb's location (Matt 27:61).
- Matthew makes clear that the chief priests and Pharisees meet with Pilate on the Sabbath (v. 62), a questionable activity on this sacred day. The Pharisees apparently recall Jesus's words about the "sign" of Jonah and correctly interpret it as a claim that He would rise "after three days" (Matt 12:39–40).
- Pilate no doubt recognizes the value of preventing unfounded rumors of a resurrection to spread and cause further commotion among the people, so he gives the leaders a separate charge of Roman soldiers (cf. Matt 28:14) to guard the tomb. A Roman seal would have to be placed over the stone sealing the tomb to prevent tampering (cf. Dan 6:17) and it would have to be guarded round the clock to ensure it would stay secure (cf. Josh 10:18).

Application of the Chapter

Some lessons we may glean from Matthew 27 include:

1. Jesus's silence in response to unjust accusations provides a model for us of patient trust in God under difficult circumstances (cf. 1 Pet 2:20–23).
2. Judas's sad end illustrates how Satan works on those who submit to his will: after his purposes are served, he often quickly abandons them to their own fate.

Endnotes

- 1 Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1988), §37.83.
- 2 Similarly, Craig A. Evans, *Matthew*, *New Cambridge Bible Commentary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 448.
- 3 See Catherine Sider Hamilton, "His Blood Be upon Us: Innocent Blood and the Death of Jesus in Matthew," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 70 (2008): 95–97; and Cedric E. W. Vine, *Jesus and the Nations: Discipleship and Mission in the Gospel of Matthew* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2022), 62–63.
- 4 Cf. Josephus, *Jewish War* 5.176–183.
- 5 See Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Social-Rhetorical Commentary*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 2:1099.
- 6 Clinton Wahlen, "Are the Jews Today Responsible for the Death of Christ?," in *Interpreting Scripture: Bible Questions and Answers*, ed. Gerhard Pfandl, rev. ed. (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2017), 299; cf. Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1911), 35: "The Jews had forged their own fetters; they had filled for themselves the cup of vengeance. In the utter destruction that befell them as a nation, and in all the woes that followed them in their dispersion, they were but reaping the harvest which their own hands had sown."
- 7 Further, see W. D. Edwards, W. J. Gabel, and F. E. Hosmer, "On the Physical Death of Jesus Christ," *Journal of the American Medical Association* 255, no. 11 (1986): 1455–1463.

3. The willingness of Israel's leaders and Pilate to condemn an innocent man to death in order to maintain their respected positions reveals a profound moral blindness and the deceitfulness of the human heart (Jer 17:9; cf. Prov 12:5).

4. The crowd's readiness to be influenced by the Jewish leaders, without sufficient regard for the moral weight and lasting significance of their decision, cautions against hasty decisions that may "seem right."

5. That the first witnesses to the empty tomb were women is a reminder that God uses both women and men to proclaim the good news. That two of these women were also mothers deserves to be highlighted in an era when motherhood is often relegated to a lesser role by modern societal norms. The important place Scripture accords to those who raise godly men and women for the kingdom of heaven should not be overlooked.

6. It is impossible for human minds to fully grasp the nature of the suffering Jesus endured in being separated from and forsaken by the Father, an experience unique in the history of the universe.

Clinton Wahlen

Associate Director of the
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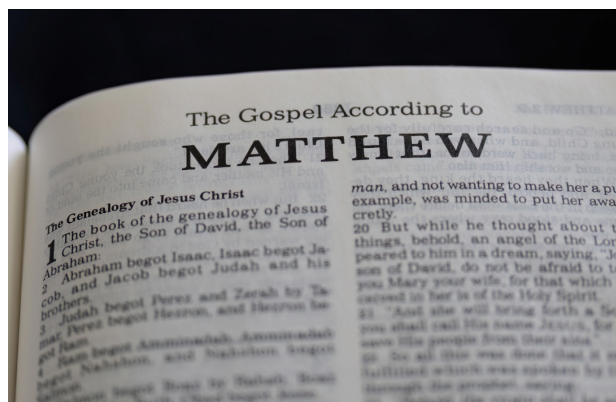


8 A lunar eclipse requires a full moon but does not darken the sky.

9 Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, and Henry Stuart Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 9th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 99.

10 Previously, he had been a disciple "secretly, for fear of the Jews" (John 19:38).

11 Suggested by W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew* (London: T & T Clark, 2004), 3:648.



Honorable Mention Award

Elias Brasil de Souza, director of the Biblical Research Institute at the General Conference, world headquarters of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Silver Spring, MD, recently received an Honorable Mention award from the Associated Church Press at the Best of the Church Press Awards on May 17, 2024, for his article “Upholding Scripture in Times of Ethical Relativism.” The article was published in the January 2023 issue of *Ministry* magazine. We congratulate Elias Brasil de Souza for this award. It demonstrates that Adventist scholarship is recognized and appreciated for its quality and theological contribution beyond the narrow boundaries of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The full article can be found at “Upholding Scripture in Times of Ethical Relativism,” *Ministry*, January 2023, <https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/2023/01/Upholding-Scripture-in-times-of-ethical-relativism> (accessed June 25, 2024).



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