

***Kevorkian:  
He Went to Jail, Is He Going to Hell?***

<sup>NRS</sup> **Philippians 1:20** It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be put to shame in any way, but that by my speaking with all boldness, Christ will be exalted now as always in my body, whether by life or by death.<sup>21</sup> For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain.<sup>22</sup> If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer.<sup>23</sup> I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better;<sup>24</sup> but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you.

<sup>NRS</sup> **Luke 23:39** One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!"<sup>40</sup> But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?"<sup>41</sup> And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong."<sup>42</sup> Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."<sup>43</sup> He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

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You may have heard the story about the minister who was preaching about heaven and hell. He paused, and shouted, "If you want to go to heaven, raise your hand!" Hands shot into the air. Then he noticed that Brother Smith hadn't raised his hand. Knowing that Brother Smith was getting a little hard of hearing, he shouted louder, "If you want to go to heaven, raise your hand!" Brother Smith just sat there. Incredulously, the preacher asked him, "Brother Smith, when you get really old and die, don't you want to go to heaven?" "Sure I do," said Brother Smith, "but from the way you were so excited and shouting and all, I figured you were trying to get a group together to go today."

Kevorkian is famous for having assisted many people to commit suicide. There aren't many names that evoke as much controversy, strong feelings, heated argument, or vehement disgust or hatred as the name Kevorkian. He's been given the nickname "Dr. Death." He's been stripped of his license to practice medicine. And he was imprisoned for eight years. People seem to either hate him or admire him, with very little gray area in between.

On the one hand, some people see his actions as providing a way for people who are terminally ill to put an end to their suffering in a merciful way, as a question of individual freedom and the right to be in control of one's own life. On the other hand, others see his actions as playing God, as murder, as having no respect for life, and as jumping on a slippery slope that leads to killing people when society decides that they are no longer useful. It's easy to see why the topic of assisted suicide generates so much heat. How we view it depends a great deal on how we understand the subject of suicide itself.

Seeking to shine more light than heat on the subject, I headed to scripture. There are six instances of suicide in the Bible. One of the stories I heard a lot in Sunday School as a child was about Samson. My teachers would gloss over or leave out entirely Samson's weak will and bad decisions when it came to women. But they waxed eloquent about how Samson pushed two pillars apart, collapsing the pagan temple and destroying many Philistine leaders. That was also the cause of Samson's death, but we didn't dwell on that. We didn't take much note of the fact that Samson's motive was revenge for being blinded, nor that he prayed, not to escape and serve God, but that he might die in the process.

Then there is King Saul. In his final battle, King Saul's three sons were killed and he himself was badly wounded by enemy archers. Saul asked his armor-bearer to "take my sword and kill me to prevent the enemy from torturing me." His armor-bearer refused, so Saul fell on his own sword and died, and then his armor-bearer did the same thing. Samson, King Saul, and his armor bearer are three of the six suicides in scripture. Two others are little known people during the period of the kings of Israel, and the

sixth is Judas Iscariot. While several of the six were flawed or failures in some way, none of the six were criticized for the way their life ended.

There are also several people in scripture who wanted to end their life. They include Moses, who was exhausted from overwork (Numbers 11:15), Elijah, who was running scared for his life and despaired of things ever getting better (1 Kings 19:4), Job, who found life cruel and painful (3:1;6:8; 7:15-16), and Jonah who was furious because he was sure that God was unjust and unfair (4:8).

The person in scripture who seems to have given the most thought about life here versus life after death was the Apostle Paul. He discusses the subject in two of his letters. In <sup>NRS</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:4-8 he writes, "For while we are still in this tent, we groan under our burden, because we wish not to be unclothed but to be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life."<sup>5</sup> He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee.<sup>6</sup> So we are always confident; even though we know that while we are at home in the body - we are away from the Lord--<sup>7</sup> for we walk by faith, not by sight.<sup>8</sup> Yes, we do have confidence, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord." Paul is declaring that if he were Brother Smith, he would raise his hand. He was ready to depart, ready to get into the boat to cross Jordan, ready to take the train to glory land.

The other text where Paul discusses the subject is the one we heard from Philippians. "For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain."<sup>22</sup> If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer.<sup>23</sup> I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better;<sup>24</sup> but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you." Again here, as in Second Corinthians, we hear Paul expressing his readiness, even eagerness, to move beyond death to resurrection with Christ. And we generally read this as a theoretical or philosophical discussion. Paul is asking himself, "How would I feel about it if such and such took place?"

However, we can also hear this as a passage where Paul is making a decision about what he's going to do. Listen again to the text. "I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better;<sup>24</sup> but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you."<sup>25</sup> Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith,<sup>26</sup> so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again." Paul seems to be saying, "It would be far better for me to die. I want to leave this life and be with Christ. But it would be better for you if I kept on living. Since I know for sure that my living would be of great benefit to you, I'm sure that I will decide to keep living for your sake and because I want to celebrate your growth in faith when I come visit you again." This passage does not demand that we hear that Paul is passively waiting to live or die. Nor does it demand that we hear that Paul is making the decision to live or die. But since Paul says, "I'll keep on living so that I can come celebrate with you," one possibility is to hear Paul making a choice about whether to live or die.

So, is Kevorkian going to hell for assisting people in committing suicide? As we have seen, scripture doesn't specifically single out suicide for condemnation. There isn't any shame heaped upon those who die this way because of the way they died. In addition, some very prominent servants of God certainly desired to die.

As I have traveled in Hungary, in Tennessee, and on some church lawns here in Thomasville, I have seen not one, but three crosses displayed. Jesus wasn't crucified alone, but between two criminals. We speak of the thief on the cross, but that doesn't describe the men crucified with Jesus strongly enough. The word used by Matthew and Mark means robber or insurrectionist. This isn't someone who stole an apple from a vendor in the market. This is a brigand, the sort of person who beat a man nearly to death on the road to Jericho, later to be rescued by a passing Samaritan. The word used by Luke signifies a hardened criminal, one who has committed serious crimes. For punishment, the Romans whipped people, put them in prison, or banished them to some deserted place. Crucifixion wasn't the punishment for petty theft. So the criminals hanging on crosses on each side of Jesus were very bad actors. One said as much, by admitting that "We are getting the punishment that we deserve." Then he turned to Jesus and said, "Remember me when you come into your kingdom." He didn't declare how sorry he was for the way he lived his life. He didn't beg for forgiveness. He simply asked to be remembered.

Three times while he was on the cross, Jesus was mocked by people saying “Save yourself!” And indeed, Jesus does save someone – a dying criminal who has declared that he is getting the punishment that he deserves. When you think about it, even as he's dying, Jesus blesses the sort of person that has often been in the forefront of his ministry: the outcast, the scum of society, the greedy, and the immoral.

We act like there's some sort of formula, a calculation that takes place that yields a winning or losing score at our death. Some picture it as simple addition and subtraction or as putting good deeds on one side of the scales and sins on the other side to see which weighs more. Others suppose that the calculation is more complex, a divine second degree quadratic equation that factors in environmental influences, hidden motives, weighted values for different sins, and temptations passed over.

In place of that, consider a theology of grace, a gift that isn't bound up tightly to works, but a gift that is given to people who like Paul, find that “I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.”(Romans 7:19) Part of the difficulty is that none of us is unambiguously good or completely evil. “Even the saint remains a sinner and needs forgiveness and even the sinner is a saint in so far as he stands under the divine forgiveness.”<sup>i</sup>

Rather than feeling certain about whether or not Kevorkian will go to hell, perhaps based on God's abundant love and Jesus' example on the cross, we should hope and pray for forgiveness that is far greater than we would desire for ourselves - forgiveness greater than we are even be able to imagine. Amen.

There are biblical passages that give sharp warnings and suggest a double outcome of history. They speak of wonderful reward and terrible punishment.(Matt. 24:36-42; 25:31-46) But there are also scriptures that point to the redemption of all things. (1 Cor. 15:22; Rom. 11:32) Karl Barth suggested that rather than trying to explain the tension between these two views, we should, based on God's abundant love, hope and pray for forgiveness far greater than we would desire or even be able to imagine.

When we consider the end of history we should be filled with thankfulness and joy as we "look forward to the time when the will of the world's Creator, Reconciler, Savior, and Renewer will prevail once and for all - when justice will triumph over injustice, love over hatred and greed, peace over hostility, humanity over inhumanity, the kingdom of God over the powers of darkness. The last judgment will come not against [the world] but for the good of the world. That is good news not just for Christians but for everyone!"<sup>ii</sup>

“Eternal life is unceasing joy in the completion of reconciled life: ‘the reconciliation of *all things*’ (Col.1:15-20) – reconciliation between human beings and God,”<sup>iii</sup> reconciliation among us, within us, and with the rest of creation. “By contrast, hell is simply wanting to be oneself apart from God’s grace and in isolation from others. It is the hellish weariness and boredom of a life focused entirely on itself. It is not an arbitrary divine punishment at the end of history. Hell is the self-destructive resistance to the eternal love of God.”<sup>iv</sup>

<sup>NRS</sup> **Judges 16:28** Then Samson called to the LORD and said, "Lord GOD, remember me and strengthen me only this once, O God, so that with this one act of revenge I may pay back the Philistines for my two eyes."<sup>29</sup> And Samson grasped the two middle pillars on which the house rested, and he leaned his weight against them, his right hand on the one and his left hand on the other.<sup>30</sup> Then Samson said, "Let me die with the Philistines." He strained with all his might; and the house fell on the lords and all the people who were in it. So those he killed at his death were more than those he had killed during his life.<sup>31</sup> Then his brothers and all his family came down and took him and brought him up and buried him between Zorah and Eshtaol in the tomb of his father Manoah. He had judged Israel twenty years.

<sup>NRS</sup> **1 Samuel 31:3** The battle pressed hard upon Saul; the archers found him, and he was badly wounded by them.<sup>4</sup> Then Saul said to his armor-bearer, "Draw your sword and thrust me through with it, so that these uncircumcised may not come and thrust me through, and make sport of me." But his armor-bearer was unwilling; for he was terrified. So Saul took his own sword and fell upon it.<sup>5</sup> When his armor-bearer saw that Saul was dead, he also fell upon his sword and died with him.<sup>6</sup> So Saul and his three sons and his armor-bearer and all his men died together on the same day.

**The other suicides in scripture are Ahitophel (2 Samuel 17:23), Zimri (1 Kings 16:18), and Judas (Matt 27:5)**

<sup>NRS</sup> **2 Samuel 17:23** When Ahithophel saw that his counsel was not followed, he saddled his donkey and went off home to his own city. He set his house in order, and hanged himself; he died and was buried in the tomb of his father.

<sup>NRS</sup> **1 Kings 16:18** When Zimri saw that the city was taken, he went into the citadel of the king's house; he burned down the king's house over himself with fire, and died--<sup>19</sup> because of the sins that he committed, doing evil in the sight of the LORD, walking in the way of Jeroboam, and for the sin that he committed, causing Israel to sin.

<sup>NRS</sup> **Matthew 27:3** When Judas, his betrayer, saw that Jesus was condemned, he repented and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders.<sup>4</sup> He said, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood." But they said, "What is that to us? See to it yourself."<sup>5</sup> Throwing down the pieces of silver in the temple, he departed; and he went and hanged himself.<sup>6</sup> But the chief priests, taking the pieces of silver, said, "It is not lawful to put them into the treasury, since they are blood money."<sup>7</sup> After conferring together, they used them to buy the potter's field as a place to bury foreigners.<sup>8</sup> For this reason that field has been called the Field of Blood to this day.

<sup>NRS</sup> **Acts 1:16** "Friends, the scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit through David foretold concerning Judas, who became a guide for those who arrested Jesus--<sup>17</sup> for he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry."<sup>18</sup> (Now this man acquired a field with the reward of his wickedness; and falling headlong, he burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out.<sup>19</sup> This became known to all the residents of Jerusalem, so that the field was called in their language Hakeldama, that is, Field of Blood.)

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<sup>i</sup> Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3, p 408

<sup>ii</sup> Shirley C. Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine, Rev Ed* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 1994) p 387

<sup>iii</sup> Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2004) p 346

<sup>iv</sup> Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2004) p 347