



WHERE DO GOD'S PEOPLE FIND COMFORT IN THE SUICIDE OF A *Non-Christian?*

by Rev. Brian Heller

11:53 p.m. — that's when the phone rang. It was the call I never wanted to receive. On the other line was a neighboring town's police department. To this day, what the officer said is a blur, but I heard the main point of the message loud and clear. A woman whom I had been helping had killed herself, leaving behind her three-year-old daughter. And she *wasn't* a Christian. My heart broke. In all of my talks with her, she made her indifference about Christianity clear. She wanted nothing to do with the church and Christ's salvific message, and now my opportunity to witness Christ's love to her and also to love her myself as someone whom Christ had died for, was tragically cut short. Maybe this is a story that you too are familiar with. Maybe you've had a family member, friend, co-worker or neighbor outside of the faith take their own life.

Let's face it: Especially in the case of suicide, things don't seem to add up. If God wants all people to be saved, why does He permit someone to kill himself, especially one who is not in the faith? What happens to their soul? Will we see that person again in the new heaven and new earth? It's easy for us to keep on circling around these questions. But really, when we consider the suicide of the non-Christian, we do well to ask ourselves: What is the question behind the question? What is it, *really*? Why are we asking ourselves these things? Are we trying to make God more friendly, loving or "fair"? Are we trying to fashion God into our own image, and have

Him abide by our own skewed sense of justice? Are we trying to find salvation outside of Christ alone?

The truth is, when it comes to this heartbreaking topic, *it's OK* for us, those left behind — the friends, family, acquaintances — to be angry, mad and scared. Yes, it is OK to feel this way — but guard yourself, because Satan loves to use emotions to manipulate you. Especially when a loved one outside of the faith dies by suicide, we demand answers in a situation where, oftentimes, answers are hard to come by. Why did he/she do this? Was it something that I did? With suicide, there seems to be no closure, so the temptation is to do anything and everything to get some light on the situation. But what ends up happening is that we act exactly like Adam and Eve. We *want* to get an answer, any answer, in this horrific situation, so we seek knowledge that has not been given for us to know. Satan offers us our own "fruits of knowledge" today. We look for answers in all of the wrong places.

What does that look like today? If you walk into your local Barnes & Noble store, you can pick up a Ouija board. According to the product description, "Just ask it a question and wait to see what answer the Mystifying Oracle will reveal to you." Sounds tempting, right? Finding answers from the supernatural sure did for Saul, God's first anointed king over Israel. The power of kingship went to his head, and Saul repeatedly disobeyed the Lord's commands. Ultimately,

Saul had turned from the Lord and had become an unbeliever. So when wartime came and Saul saw the vast army of the Philistines gathered against him, he got scared and sought out a witch in Endor to give him some comfort. After the prophet Samuel miraculously appeared, ironically startling the witch herself, Saul was given the message that the Philistines would overtake him and the Israelites. The very next day, Saul ended up committing suicide on the battlefield. David, the one anointed to be king in place of Saul, upon hearing this news of Saul's death ripped his clothes up and mourned. He cried out in anguish, "You daughters of Israel, weep over Saul, who clothed you luxuriously in scarlet, who put ornaments of gold on your apparel" (2 SAM. 1:24). Yes, even the great David wept in the face of the suicide of an unbeliever. It's OK for you to do the same. Just as David did, take all of your emotions — your laments, your sorrows, your burdens — and lay them at the nail-pierced feet of our Savior. As our Lord says, "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (MATT. 11:29–30).

We don't have all of the answers when a non-Christian takes their own life, and that's OK. The Rev. Harold Senkbeil puts it this way, "It would be nice to have all the answers; to be able to sit here and put all of the pieces together, to be able to come up with some judgment in this case. But, as we all know, God is the judge, not we."¹ It's hard for us not to ask the question — the one that's the elephant in the room — "Is my loved one in heaven?" Remember that God is judge, not you. And whatever God does is good. Instead of trying to make a case for why our loved one should get into heaven, we are called to trust in our Lord's mercy and goodness, and rest in His unchanging peace.

Thanks be to God that He is not only judge, but is also our comforter. Jesus is the source of our comfort in these painful moments, and Christ is our hope when all hope seems lost. We do not grieve as those who have no hope, as St. Paul writes. C.S. Lewis, in his text *A Grief Observed*, writes, "What St. Paul says can comfort only those who love God better than the dead."² Harsh, but true. We are called to love the Lord our God with all of our heart, soul and mind, over all else, even the dead. This isn't easy. Some days will be harder than others. That's OK too. As Lewis further writes, "Tonight all the hells of young grief have opened up again; the mad words, the bitter resentment, the fluttering in the stomach, the nightmare

unreality, the wallowed-in tears. For in grief, nothing stays put."³ I know I've been there as that officer's voice echoes in my ears again from time to time. Maybe you've been there too. Playing those last conversations over and over again in your head, wondering if there was something you could've said or done differently, wondering how this nightmare could've turned out differently. And this cycle of interrogating ourselves never seems to end. Yet Christ breaks into this and does what He does best: brings us back to our Baptisms in His holy, precious blood. He assures us that He alone is the Lord of life and He is the Savior of the world, not you or me. He invites us to curl up in the lap of His Word and cry as we partake of His Sacraments. He promises that He will indeed wipe away all of our tears, and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain (REV. 21:4). These promises, dear reader, are made *for you*.

In a world full of pain, misery, worry and questions, we don't put our trust in uncertainties. We cling instead to what is certain, our Lord's promises to us. In the tragic case of a suicide of an unbeliever, we do not dwell on questions, nor do we try to make God more "friendly" or more "fair." We do not love the dead more than God. Instead, when a loved one dies like this, we rest in the comfort of Christ's unchanging and certain Word. Let this death be a wake-up call for us to faithfully attend our Lord's house each week, where the entire liturgy gives us the comfort and peace that we desperately long for. Let our lips taste the medicine of immortality of our Lord's body and blood. Trust that whatever our Lord does is for our good. He loves us and cares for us, even when it seems like He has abandoned us or that He is being harsh with us. We do not need a witch from Endor, a Ouija board or the fake Jesus of our imaginations to give us peace in a peaceless situation. We need Christ, the one who was crucified for us. It is in Him that we find comfort, peace and security, now and evermore.

In the words that the Rev. Harold Senkbeil spoke to the family and friends of a young man who committed suicide, "There are lots of questions here tonight. And I don't know all the answers. But let's stick to the one thing we do know; No matter how tough the road, no matter how deep the agony, no matter how sharp the pain, no matter how bitter the grief, no matter how desperate the loneliness, one thing remains forever true. GOD IS FOR US. God is on your side."⁴ ✠

¹ Harold L. Senkbeil, *The Care of Souls: Cultivating a Pastor's Heart* (Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2019), 74.

² C.S. Lewis, *The Complete C.S. Lewis Signature Classics* (San Francisco: Harper, 2007), 667.

³ Lewis, 680.

⁴ Senkbeil, 74.