

A Biblical discussion of end of life issues



Written by Chris Buttenshaw as part of CARE's Live and Let Live series

Introduction

Assisted suicide and euthanasia are issues that continue to surface in the media, amongst activists seeking to make such practices legal, in the courts and in some political circles. However, they are not spoken about much amongst Christians.

Of course on one level 'suffering' – particularly struggling towards the end of life – is undesirable and to be avoided. It is something that many fear and can be intensely painful for both the sufferer and loved ones who feel powerless to act.

However, for Christians, any discussion about suffering, life and death must be framed in the context of faith in a sovereign God who is supremely in control, whose love and attention does not waver according to circumstances (Psalm 136) and whose ways are beyond our understanding (Isaiah 55:8-9; Job 36:26). Christians trust God with their lives in this world and that to come, so why would we not also trust Him about the time and circumstances of our death? John Piper, reflecting on suffering in the life of Job, writes '[the aim of suffering] is that our faith might be refined, our holiness might be enlarged, our soul might be saved, and our God might be glorified.'

A Christian's hope is secure in Jesus Christ and we are called to live in this world as God's children, not conforming to its patterns but offering ourselves as living sacrifices (Romans 12:1-2). Sadly, we can all too easily follow the prevailing wisdom of our culture rather than the eternal truth of the Bible. This is true of many areas of our lives, including how we approach matters of life and death.

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the Lord. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts..."

Isaiah 55:8-9



Background

A survey of 17,000 evangelicals conducted by the Evangelical Alliance in 2010 and published in January 2011 revealed that although 60% of people thought that assisted suicide was always wrong. 40% were either unsure or disagreed. This is a snapshot of evangelicals and not a complete picture; however, it nevertheless provides food for thought.

Christians are to love the Lord and their neighbour (Mark 12: 28-31) – to show compassion in response to suffering is natural. However, we must look more closely at the God of the Bible. Yes, He is deeply, unfailingly loving and compassionate (see Psalm 86:15; Isaiah 49:13; Matthew 9:36; John 3:16 to name but a few) – but He is also much more than that.

Scripture is '*God-breathed*' (2 Timothy 3:16-17), '*living and active*' (Hebrews 4:12). It is truth so Christians must look to it first, rather than to the popular gods of our culture: autonomy, individualism and comfort.

The noted ethicist, Professor John Wyatt reminds us that biblical thought always draws a line between the experience of suffering and the sufferer him or herself. It is all too easy to focus on our immediate circumstances rather than trusting in God's '*unfailing love*' (Psalm 13:5). The truth is that our lives are not our own. We are made in God's image, by God and through God, for God and for His fame and renown, not our comfort.

Our problem is that this jars with our sinful nature.

The purpose of this booklet isn't to make Christians feel guilty, but to raise our eyes first and foremost to view God rightly as our Creator and ourselves as created beings accountable to Him. Knowing this - truly knowing this - we can resist calls to legalise assisted suicide and euthanasia as we love, worship and obey our God and genuinely love our neighbour.

Creation - we are created for Him

This is a glorious truth, that humans are created in God's likeness (Genesis 1:26-27) – we are image-bearers of God! We are not random compositions of cells, not machine-like automatons, not highly-evolved animals, but image-bearers of God! Ultimately, our bodies aren't our bodies at all – they belong to Him (1 Corinthians 6:13b)!

Take a moment to look at your hands. Flex your fingers slowly, one at a time. Look at the way your hands move, how the tendons work underneath the translucent skin, pulled, directed effortlessly by your muscles. Look at how the veins just beneath the surface of your hand gently and carefully shift as those muscles work to move your fingers at your slightest command.

We have been '*knit together*'; we are '*fearfully and wonderfully made*' (Psalm 139:13-14); '*the very hairs of your head are all numbered*' (Luke 12:7). We mustn't believe the lie of our present age that our lives are meaningless, that we are mere accidents of biology. We are created beings made by and for a Creator God. It therefore matters what we do with our bodies – this is true of all aspects of our lives, including how we live and how we die.

To choose assisted suicide or euthanasia for ourselves or for another is to entirely undermine and ignore our astonishing grace-divined Godlikeness. We are beautiful images of God's creation, made a little lower than the heavenly beings (Psalm 8:5). Employing our bodies to do anything other than honour and obey the Lord is not an expression of freedom, but one of slavery to sin from which we have been set free by Jesus Christ's sacrifice on the cross.

*You have made them a little
lower than the angels and
crowned them with glory and
honor.*

Psalm 8:5



Redemption - we have been bought by Him

We are valuable and valued, not because of our righteousness, but because of God's mercy. This found expression through the extraordinary redemptive power of the blood of Jesus Christ (Ephesians 1:7-8; 1 Peter 1:18-19). We have been redeemed – bought back at a price – and are free from the yoke of slavery (Galatians 5:1). We are no longer under the law but, because of Jesus' death on the cross, we are free to live as *'obedient slaves'* to righteousness and godliness by His grace (Romans 6:15-23).

The glorious, unfathomable mysterious truth to which the Christian can cling is that *'while we were still sinners, Christ died for us'* (Romans 5:8). He was broken, bearing our sins bodily upon the Cross. We *'were bought at a price'* (1 Corinthians 6:20).

We owed a debt we could not pay. Our lives have been paid for and are not our own. How, therefore, can we disregard the price He paid by conceding that assisted suicide or euthanasia are acceptable choices for a Christian to make? What does this say about how dearly we value Christ's sacrifice for us?

For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.

1 Peter 1:18-19



Resurrection - we will be raised by Him

'By His power God raised the Lord from the dead, and he will raise us also.' (1 Corinthians 6:14). The future for our bodies is that they will be raised on the last day just as Jesus Christ was raised (1 Corinthians 15:20). We need to understand what this means.

Jesus Christ suffered both bodily and spiritually and He was raised in both body and spirit. Jesus Christ was there 'in the beginning' (John 1:1-5), and His body itself is eternal – changed and transformed, yes, but the same body. So, too, are our bodies eternal.

Paul explains that it is foolish to think of our bodies being aesthetically the same as they are now when we are raised on the last day. He writes, *'the body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body'* (1 Corinthians 15: 42-44). 'Natural' bodies are time-bound and therefore only temporarily alive, whereas 'spiritual' bodies are no less material but, like Jesus' body when He appeared to His disciples after the resurrection, are fit for existence with God eternally (see also 1 Corinthians 2:14-3:3). Jesus Christ *'will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body'* (Philippians 3:20-21).

Therefore, we can say confidently that the future is not only spiritual, but also physical. As a result it matters greatly what we do with our bodies in this life. Choosing assisted suicide for yourself or assisting another is completely at odds with this understanding of all it means to be made in God's image; the moral and ethical decisions Christians make have eternal ramifications.

*By his power God raised the Lord
from the dead, and he will raise
us also.*

1 Corinthians 6:14



United - we have been joined to Him

This wonderful truth has two sides to it. We are joined individually to Christ through the Church, bodily and spiritually – *'our bodies are members of Christ himself'* (1 Corinthians 6:15). However, we are also united with Christ and share His inheritance because of what He has done (Romans 6:5-6).

Although it hardly seems comprehensible, the truth is that Jesus is with us (see John 17:20-23). Experiencing suffering yourself or watching someone else going through it may feel and seem painful, lonely and seemingly insurmountable. It may feel as though the best choice in such extreme circumstances – perhaps the only choice we think we have – is to choose assisted suicide. If we have to rely on our own strength this may be true; however, Christ – who was *'tempted in every way, just as we are – yet [He] was without sin'* (Hebrews 4:15) – is greater. Jesus is with us. We are united with and enabled by Him and His strength and His power to persevere and to endure – for our good and for His glory.

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet he did not sin.

Hebrews 4:15



Dwelling place - we are a home for Him

'Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?' writes Paul (1 Corinthians 6:19). It may be easy for us to hear and even to accept the fact that the Holy Spirit lives within each individual Christian (1 Corinthians 6:17) but what does it actually mean?

It is helpful to look back at the building of the first temple by King Solomon:

'When Solomon finished praying, fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices, and the glory of the Lord filled the temple. The priests could not enter the temple of the Lord because the glory of the Lord filled it. When all the Israelites saw the fire coming down and the glory of the Lords above the temple, they knelt on the pavement with their faces to the ground, and they worshipped and gave thanks to the Lord, saying: 'He is good; his love endures forever.'" (2 Chronicles 7:1-2)

A temple is an incredible thing – it is where God's presence with His people is symbolised, the place filled with *'the glory of the Lord'*. The description of Solomon's temple with its burnt offerings and sacrifices point us towards God and ultimately to Jesus, the ultimate blood sacrifice. Jesus Christ is Immanuel – *'God with us'* (Isaiah 7:14) – and it is through Him, by faith, that we enter into the presence of the Father.

Tim Chester notes in his book *'Captured by a Better Vision'*: *'All that the temple represented is now a reality in your life. God's glorious, holy, awesome, terrifying presence is in you, through the Holy Spirit.'* It is vitally important for us to understand the holiness of who we are, of who God has made us by the power of the Holy Spirit. Our God is very different from us – He is *'enthroned....exalted over all the nations....holy.'* (Psalm 99:1-3) But, if you are a Christian who has called on the name of the Lord by faith, you have already been *'sanctified in Jesus Christ'* – you, too, are blameless and reflect God's holiness (1 Corinthians 1:2).



Further outworking

Consider the following example: 'God loves me so it follows that He must want me to be happy. I am experiencing suffering beyond what I can bear. It would make me happy if my suffering – or that of my relative or friend – were to end, so bringing about death must be alright.'

This is a simplistic statement but it should make us stop and think.

If we have recognised that our bodies are not our own, have considered who we are created to be, for Whom and what that means, it should jar with us. We know who we are as those created by God whose love never fails nor ceases and is not dependent on circumstance (Psalm 13:5-6).

Of course Christians should not be aloof and removed from the trials and suffering of others, but nor should we be swayed by compassion which fails to honour the dignity and wonder of who each individual has been created to be and what he or she has been created for. In God's eyes human dignity is inherent, it cannot be lost.

Again, as John Wyatt notes in his excellent book, 'Matters of Life and Death': 'human beings are Godlike beings which we should respond to in a number of ways: with wonder, respect, empathy and above all protection from abuse, harm and manipulation.'

We are called to honour the Lord Jesus Christ. That means we need to know Him. We need to know that He is infinitely better than death. The Lord Jesus Christ has defeated death and one day *'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.'* (Revelation 21:4)

Assisted suicide, euthanasia and death itself are not easy for us to consider. Christians cannot superhumanly overcome the many challenges involved. However, we have the glorious promise of an eternal future through the Lord Jesus Christ. Through all things we can trust Him to strengthen, comfort and rescue us.



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