



FEED MY SHEEP

PUBLISHED BY JAMES W. BRUGGEMAN
STONE KINGDOM MINISTRIES
P. O. BOX 6388
ASHEVILLE, NC 28816 U.S.A.

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Suicide and Cremation

Our continuing studies of the respective character qualities of King Saul and David have taken us up to, and now including, the death of Saul. In the immediately preceding FMS, we saw from 1 Samuel 31:1-6, that not only did the king himself die in the battle against the Philistines, but that three of his sons were also slain, including David's beloved friend, Prince Jonathan.

There is reason to debate the details of just exactly how Saul perished. The aforementioned passage indicates that Saul fell upon his own sword. However, in 2 Samuel 1:1-12, an Amalekite reports to David how he assisted Saul in putting an end to his life. Would that be the first recorded instance of an "assisted suicide?" There are several ways to harmonize the apparently contradictory passages, but we will not present that work here. (We have done so in audiotapes #405 & 406, *The Death of Saul*, \$10 ppd.)

However, the demise of King Saul and its aftermath provide us with an opportunity to look at two very sensitive subjects: suicide and cremation.

As we read the passage surrounding Saul's final hours on Mount Gilboa, we might wonder why did he not seek to make a peace treaty with the Philistines? Or why did he not flee from the approaching conflict in the valley of Megiddo? The fact is that an Unseen Hand was at work which had allowed Saul's so called free will to bring about circumstances which had him trapped. After all, he was the king. He could not simply desert the field of battle.

Can you imagine yourself in Saul's position?

What honor and respect would he have left among his people were he to desert the battle? It has been said that pride is the root of all sin. Certainly this was foremost among the character traits of Saul. He was proud to the end. He could not bear the thought of deserting and then facing the people again. It would have been utterly shameful and totally devastating to his pride.

This vice of pride leads us to discuss the morality of suicide. It was Saul's pride and self-will which led him to that final deed. By self-will, we mean rebellion against God's revealed will. The Scriptures—and our own observations of the lives of men—teach us that self-will leads to self-injury and ultimately to self-destruction. Consider the following proverb in the context of self-will.

Proverbs 8:35 For whoso findeth me findeth life, and shall obtain favour of YHWH.

36 But he that sinneth against me wrongeth his own soul: all they that hate me love death.

Some common examples would include indulgence in sins of the flesh: drunkenness; gluttony, sexual promiscuity. All are of self-will in rebellion to God and these all lead to disease and early death.

Another example of a self-willed individual is today commonly called a "control freak." Among the characteristics of the control freak is that he or she is domineering, arrogant, loud, abusive, insensitive, selfish and a know-it-all. We can easily see how this type of person is often the classic picture of one who has high blood pressure and often perishes of early heart attack or stroke.

But, dear reader, please do not presume that we are insinuating that everyone who has had a heart attack or a stroke is a control freak. There can be a plethora of other health causes. We are speaking in generalities here. Consider another proverb.

Proverbs 29:1 He, that being often reprov'd hardeneth his neck, shall suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy.

This is talking about stubbornness here. If one persists year after year in stubborn rebellion against God's chastening, then it irresistibly leads down a path to death. Saul had a 40-year period of testing. Today we can see many examples of wicked people who seemingly flaunt their sins for decades, and it makes us wonder.

But we cannot assume by the fact that they appear to "get away with it" that God does not judge them ultimately. As with Saul, it might be 40 or more years before God brings the ultimate penalty of death. Or we see certain wealthy and powerful people who live to ripe, old ages of 90-plus years and then die peacefully. But then, when we look at the proverb again, we must consider the possibility that despite their wickedness, God never reprov'd them. Why? Because some are chosen by God to be wicked! (Pharaoh and Esau, for example. We taught on that in detail in tapes #286 & 287: *Why Hast Thou Made Me Thus?: The Doctrine of Election*; \$10 ppd. They are part of the Sovereignty of God album, 10 tapes, \$30.) And I remember what a dear departed evangelist to whom I was once quite close used to say: "God doesn't balance His books at the end of every quarter."

But what about believers? Even rebellious *Christians*—i.e., Saul types—can pursue their crooked course for years with seeming impunity. Yet there always comes a time when they seem impelled and surrounded by events which they themselves have brought about by their deeds over the years, and at that time, there is no way out. The end has come. For King Saul, the only choice left was whether to die by the hand of Philistines or by his own hand.

As we stated above, it was Saul's pride and self-will which led him to commit suicide. Granted, part of his motive could have been the fear of further pain and torture which would have been inflicted by the approaching Philistines, but verse 4 (1 Samuel 31) indicates that he was more afraid of having his dead

body dishonored than of anything else.

That, too, is evidence of his pride because he was concerned only with his *own* honor and not that of Yahweh, whose name would be dishonored among the heathen upon the defeat of Israel.

Pride and self-will are synonymous with excessive *love of self*. Notice I said *excessive* love of self, because I believe that the sum of the Scriptures on this issue teaches that one must have a *proper* love of self. For example, whenever I perform a wedding ceremony, I usually quote a passage from Ephesians 5, which includes these two verses:

Ephesians 5:28 So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself.

29 For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church:

And how about the admonition to love thy neighbor *as thy self*. Doesn't that imply that we are to love our selves? Of course, it does. One way that self-love is manifested in a proper manner is in the instinct for self-preservation. Suicide is an overriding of this instinct for self-preservation. But contrary to what we might think, people do not commit suicide because they do not love themselves. They do it because they love themselves *too much*. This brings up the topic of self-esteem. Paul says this:

Romans 12:3 For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think;...

That does not preclude having a healthy self-esteem. And indeed, this does not conflict with the theme of FMS #48, "On Becoming Nobody." Becoming nobody does not mean that we despise ourselves in every form and fashion. We are the creation of the Lord of the universe and He declared it all "good." Of course, we are also "beneficiaries" of Adam's fall, but we must balance that against the fact that our Father has endowed each and every one of his creatures with certain gifts and talents. To find no value whatsoever in who you are is to despise the Creator.

We hear in the popular press and in pop psychology circles about people having *high* self-esteem,

which they say is good, or *low* self-esteem, which they say is harmful to our personal development. There are many problems with secular teachings on self-esteem, but for our purposes, we are going to equate a high self-esteem with a healthy and godly self-esteem. However, as believers, we must realize that this high self-esteem is not based on vanity, pride and self-centeredness, but upon recognizing that everything that we are and everything that we do is due to God working within us or upon us. Cf. Philippians 2:13.

Ironically, what the world calls low self-esteem is in actuality excessive self-love. How so? Well, look at how so-called “low self-esteem” is manifested? Is it not manifested in depression? ...which is a continual focus on self and how **I** am feeling? Oh, woe is me. Is it not self-pity? Is it not self-centeredness?

Is not low self-esteem connected with insecurity which is often based in large part on the fear of what others might think of me? ...Self-consciousness, timidity, inferiority complex. What are these except descriptions of excessive focus on self? So that when a person comes to the point of attempting to commit suicide, it is usually traceable to excessive self-love.

Parenthetically, I must confess that this is a difficult topic for me to teach on because I have known people who have committed suicide. I know people today who have attempted suicide. I have relatives who have attempted suicide. This teaching is not set forth in a spirit of condemnation of anyone.

I judge no one because I do not know all the circumstances that may have played a part in bringing a person to commit such an act. Most importantly, I judge no one because it is neither my right nor duty to do so. God is the judge. Furthermore, despite the tragedy of suicide, it is of immense comfort to know that even those who take their own lives will ultimately be reconciled to God. (See album A-104.)

But, my dear friends, that fact in no way condones or ameliorates the seriousness of the sin. For it is far better for that one to remain on this earth until God removes him than to take his own life. Because he will later be awakened in the judgment day to face a period of discipline in the metaphorical lake of fire.

Suicide is among the most serious of sins. It is expressly forbidden by the sixth commandment. Thou shalt not murder. Suicide is murder; murder of self.

We are all individually as well as corporately God’s creation. He owns us! Think of that. God owns you. You are really not your own boss, no matter what we think. We are stewards of the life He has given us. None of us has the right to murder God’s creation, whether it is murdering your neighbor or murdering your self. Committing suicide is usurping God’s prerogatives and it is a heinous sin.

It is also unfaithfulness to God in that he has entrusted every man with his allotted course and circumstances. His revealed Will is for us to face all the trials and tribulations of life. For some, these are sprinkled sparsely amidst many occasions of joy and happiness. For others, by God’s design, the tribulations overwhelm the sparse occasions of joy. God ordains it all. To determine the end point of our life is to put one’s self on the throne instead of God.

Suicide is *usually* a result of moral cowardice. It is the fear of facing pain or poverty or the loss of money or the loss of love or the loss of anything. A man who chooses to take his own life instead of facing those trials is a coward, not a brave man.

Suicide is condemned by the examples in Scripture of men who have borne up under the heaviest of suffering with the greatest of courage. We think of Paul and Jeremiah and Isaiah, the latter of whom tradition says, was sawn in half. Numerous other suffering saints who faced all their trials with courage and faith could be mentioned also. In contrast, the cases of recorded suicide are all of men of shame: Saul, Ahithophel and Judas. Obviously, these characters are not good role models.

Cremation

On the day following the deaths of Saul and three of his sons, the Philistines came back to the battlefield (all the armies of Israel having fled), and they proceeded to strip Saul of his armor and royal attire. They decapitated the corpses and performed indignities upon them.

1 Samuel 31: 11 And when the inhabitants of Jabeshgilead heard of that which the Philistines had done to Saul;

12 All the valiant men arose, and went all night, and took the body of Saul and the bodies of his sons from the wall of Bethshan, and came to Jabesh, and burnt them there.

When these brave men of Israel returned to Jabesh, it says they *burned* the bodies of Saul and, most likely, those of his sons as well. I have been asked privately a number of times about the practice of cremation and if it is okay for Christians to be cremated. So let me put on the record here what I believe the Scriptures teach about it.

First of all, cremation, as practiced in modern mortuary terms means burning the body completely until there is nothing left but ashes. Then the family usually receives the ashes in an urn and they either keep them or dispose of them as the deceased had wished. They often spread them in a stream or in a field or meadow or mountain or someplace that has some sentimental attachment for them and/or the deceased.

Before we go further, let me ask the reader a question. Do you think that if Jesus had been cremated, burned to ashes, that He still would have arisen whole and complete in an immortal body on the third day after His crucifixion? (When I gave this message to my live audience, they were unanimous.) If anyone has any doubt that He would have arisen no matter how scattered the atoms of His body were, then I think that person ought to be praying the Father for an added measure of faith. After all, how powerful is your God? Mine is ALL-powerful.

We realize that many people throughout the ages—both believers and the wicked—have perished in fire, and were essentially cremated, whether in war-time bombings or in house, barn, warehouse or factory fires. Many were burned at the stake for their faith in centuries past. So there is no doubt that even if one is cremated, it will make no difference in the resurrection. As I see it, it is more a matter of custom and culture.

The practice of cremation in the ancient world was like the practice of circumcision, in that many nations did and many did not. Generally speaking, the Greeks cremated and it was somewhat widespread in Rome. But the Hebrews and Persians did not.

There is no case of cremation found in the New Testament that I am aware of. However, Paul does appear to allude to it in 1 Corinthians 13:3 "...and though I give my body to be burned,..." Paul may simply have been tailoring his language to fit the

customs of his Greek readers.

Certainly in times of pestilence and plague, it is absolutely necessary to cremate corpses in order to prevent further spread of the diseases. But when infectious disease is not an issue, we are left with the following facts:

It has always been the custom of the Hebrew people to bury their dead. When Joseph the patriarch died, he was buried in Egypt, but his bones were later exhumed and brought back to Canaanland to be laid to rest alongside the bones of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

When the Bible does speak of people being burned with fire, it is not to be interpreted as meaning to burn them alive, but rather that they are first executed, and then burnt. We see this in the example of Achan in Joshua 7:25. Achan was first stoned to death. It was an ignominious death. The burning of his remains was considered a shame and a disgrace. He was denied "a proper burial," as we still say to this day in our culture.

But keep in mind, those are the historical customs of our people. As far as God's law is concerned, there appears to be no prohibition against cremation and therefore, as far as I can determine, *it is not a sin to be cremated*. If someone can show me otherwise, I have an open mind. Nevertheless, it has clearly been the custom of the Hebrew-Israelite people from the beginning to bury our dead.

To conclude this topic, we return to the story of Saul. It does mention in 1 Samuel 31:13 that they buried the bones of Saul and his sons after burning the flesh, so this was not a cremation in the sense we use it today. Why did the men of Jabesh burn the flesh? Most likely, to prevent the Philistines from attempting to steal the bodies and further maltreat what to them were trophies of war. Later on, when David is king over all Israel, he removed their bones and brought them back to the land of Benjamin and buried them there in the sepulcher of Kish, Saul's father.

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