

# Euthanasia: A Biblical Perspective

## Part 1 (of 4)

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Death will happen to all of us. Unless Christ returns, each one of us will face death in some form. Whether it be the result of an accident, disease or age-related deterioration of our bodies, each of us will go through the portal from this life to the life hereafter. The thought is not pleasant, especially if death involves pain or a measure of humiliation. Were it not for the promise of Christ's victory over death we would be tempted to despair and consider the future fearfully.

We live in a society which is abandoning the Christian faith, and this has changed the way many people around us understand suffering and death. With no belief in God's redemption from sin, suffering has lost its context and become something to be avoided at any cost. In the context of suffering at the end of life, the question is raised whether people should have the choice to end their life earlier if they wish.

Ending life deliberately in this way is called euthanasia. Euthanasia is not the same thing as refusing further medical treatment. Euthanasia is an act which has, as its primary intent, the termination of life. Despite couched in gentle-sounding words, it essentially an act of assisted suicide.

Australian states and territories have debated euthanasia in their parliaments for more than 20 years. Euthanasia was briefly legalised in the Northern Territory in 1996, before the Federal Government used its power over territories to nullify the legislation in 1997. Since that time every Australian state except Queensland has debated euthanasia legislation in some form. Last year, Victoria became the first state to legalise it and the law came into effect on June 19<sup>th</sup> this year.

Western Australia last considered euthanasia legislation in 2010 but is set to do so again this year. The recent WA Parliamentary 'Joint Select Committee on End of Life Choices' received over 700 submissions and conducted numerous public hearings. ARPA and several members from the Free Reformed Churches also gave testimony against euthanasia at these hearings. Sadly, the majority report written by this committee recommended that laws be drafted for Western Australia which would allow for euthanasia, euphemistically referring to it as "Voluntary Assisted Dying."

Now that euthanasia legislation is on the horizon in Western Australia we must fight this evil while we still can. Our lives, literally, may depend on it. The way we are treated when we lie on a hospital bed one day, the choices we are given by our doctor, the options made available by our health insurer and the willingness of increasingly cash-strapped health systems to treat us when we are old will be affected, adversely and irreparably, by the legalisation of euthanasia.

Ethics and beliefs are at the heart of the euthanasia issue, and as Christians our opposition to euthanasia is deeply rooted in our faith. Euthanasia legitimises suicide as an acceptable response to suffering and it deems certain lives to be no longer worth living. This is deeply troubling.

Sadly, Biblical reasons against euthanasia are often sidelined because they are 'religious,' implying that they must be kept out of the public sphere. This is disingenuous for two reasons. Firstly, democratic debate should reflect the diversity of beliefs in the community, including Christian beliefs. Secondly, good moral

laws have always had a Biblical basis. We should not shy away from sharing the Biblical perspective on euthanasia.

The first reason why Christians oppose euthanasia is because we believe human life has sanctity. People are made in God's image; they are distinct from animals and have an eternal soul. The Bible forbids murder (Exodus 20:13), only allowing a person's life to be taken in the context of legitimate war, self-defence and – in some cases – capital punishment. Because we believe in the sanctity of human life we also honour commands to care for the sick and treat the weak and infirm with honour and respect.

Although we believe life has sanctity, Christians do not believe that death must be resisted at all costs. Sometimes we may even desire it; people like Paul and the prophet Simeon wrote openly in scripture about their desire to die and be with God (Philippians 1:23, 2 Cor 5:8, Luke 2:29).

However, we place the timing of our death firmly in God's hands. Hebrews 9:27 speaks about how God has appointed a time for every person to die, and Psalm 139:16 describes how the days of our life are all numbered by God. Psalm 104:29-30 describes how God creates souls by sending out His Spirit and explains how they die when He takes away their breath. We believe that God will call us to our eternal home at His time.

For this reason, we reject the philosophy underlying euthanasia, namely, that people have a right to decide the time and manner of their own death. We are incapable of adding a single hour to our life and could be called out of this life at any time.

The idea that euthanasia gives control over death is really an illusion. ***Euthanasia does not give control over death, but rather it gives in to it.*** Euthanasia uses death to escape from suffering. However, suffering is a subjective thing and comes in many forms beyond physical pain. Overseas examples, particularly from Europe, show that once euthanasia is legalised for the terminally ill it inevitably expands to include other forms of suffering, including even depression and loneliness in some jurisdictions.

While it is beyond the scope of this article to examine the concept of suffering in detail, we must recognise that suffering is one of the ways God works in our lives. Although we may not understand why God inflicts suffering, we do believe that we are not abandoned by God when we suffer. God may use suffering to develop endurance, character and hope (Romans 5:3-4). The sufferings experienced at the end of life - be they pain, fear, anxiety or loss of dignity - are an extension of the sufferings we face throughout our life. Suffering makes us long with greater desire for a time when we will be relieved from the consequences of sin in this life (Romans 8:18).

The desire to take control over death and use it to escape suffering is, at heart, symptomatic of rebellion against God and a lack of willingness to submit to His will. It is not surprising that the push for euthanasia comes at the time when many 'Baby Boomers' are contemplating the end of their lives. Although it is a generalisation, it seems that the Baby Boomers, a generation known for living life on their terms, now want to die on their own terms too.

Earlier we acknowledged that death will happen to all of us, unless Christ returns. But death did not need to happen to us. Death only came into the world because of sin (Romans 5:12). While euthanasia advocates may describe a painless death as 'good', death can *never* really be considered good. Death is the ultimate degradation of human life, and it is rightly described in the Bible as an enemy to be destroyed (1

Corinthians 15:26). It only came into the world because of mankind's sin and rebellion against God. Only through Christ's death and resurrection is death a conquered enemy.

As we debate euthanasia in Western Australia much of the debate will be about statistics and safeguards, implications and consequences. We will examine these matters in subsequent articles. Ultimately, however, euthanasia is at heart an issue of faith. Society either believes in God, obeys Him and applies what His Word says about the reason for death and the purpose of suffering, or it rebels against Him, seeking – as Adam and Eve did when they fell – to wrest control from God and become like Him. Sadly the more society rebels against God and seeks to take control over life and death, the more it abandons the eternal deliverance from death which is already available through Christ's own death and resurrection.

The demand for euthanasia shows how our society desperately needs the message of the gospel, so beautifully summarised in Lord's Day 1: *What is your only comfort in life and death? That I am not my own, but belong with body and soul, both in life and in death, to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ.*

*(In the next instalment: challenging the narratives used to promote euthanasia)*

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