



## **"What does the Bible teach about Euthanasia?"**

This is the question that has been posed by a member of the Church. What prompted it I do not know, but I surmise that it may be that the brother who asked it had been thinking about the instances of Euthanasia which have been reported fairly recently in the national press.

The word itself, '*Euthanasia*', comes from the Greek, the literal meaning of which is '*easy death*', and, as I expect most people know, it is used to describe the act of assisting a person to die

### **A relatively modern concept**

There have been, in recent months several very moving media reports relating to terminally ill patients who have taken this course as a way of escape from the physical disability and pain that made life for them unbearable, and from which they saw no possibility of relief. These gravely ill patients had gone over to mainland Europe, to a country where Euthanasia is apparently not illegal, and where there does not appear to be any strong popular objection to its practice. They have gone abroad in order to seek the help to die which, in a word, British doctors felt unable to give.

The fact is that, in the vast majority of western countries, the practice of Euthanasia is illegal. Their Governments, along with their medical and judicial associations in common with our own, view the whole issue of Euthanasia with distinct unease because of the ethical, religious, social and legal problems it creates.

In the minds of the authorities, the line between '*assisted death*', i.e., Euthanasia, and '*suicide*', is extremely unclear and open to debate. Consequently, those troubled, sick people who determined to end their own lives, had to find a country in which this practice is permitted, and this meant travelling overseas to find some individual or organisation willing to help them to die. This is usually by means of the administration of a lethal mixture of drugs. Because this practice is illegal in this country, and its practice still relatively rare, it was inevitable that their action would make news headlines.

### **What does the Bible say about Euthanasia?**

This is the simple, brief question that has been asked, and the even simpler - and briefer - answer is, Nothing! Of course, as any student of ancient history knows, death by poisoning was not uncommon, before, during or even after, Bible times. Far from it in fact! There are well-known historical instances of it, involving famous people. But, what I would describe as the well-intentioned administration of powerful sedatives in order to end physical suffering and induce a peaceful death, is a relatively modern concept, and even though, as Christians, we cannot approve of it, we can, at least feel genuine compassion for the victims of those illnesses that cause them to think of ending their own lives.

The issues that invariably arise when Euthanasia is discussed are far too complex to be dealt with here - even if I felt competent to handle them - and I candidly confess that I lack the medical and legal expertise to do so.

What I am prepared to say is, that from the Christian standpoint, Euthanasia can no more be justified than can suicide. The basic difference between the two is that '*suicide*' describes *self-inflicted death*, whilst '*euthanasia*' is *assisted death*, and both amount to the unnatural, unauthorized and wilful termination of life. (I realize, of course, that a fatal accident may also be described as '*unnatural and unauthorized death*', but it is not *wilful* death).

### **'Attempted Euthanasia' in the Scriptures?**

I am aware of only one occasion in the entire Bible, when one who was about to die was offered sedation in order to make his death less painful, and, therefore, easier.

If we compare Matt. 27, verses 34 and 48, and also Mark 15, verses 23 and 36, something most interesting and significant emerges. These references remind us that on two occasions after His arrest and trials, Jesus was offered something to drink.

The first time occurred when the crucifixion procession of soldiers and the rulers of the Jews, with Jesus their prisoner, arrived at Golgotha, and before they nailed Him to the cross. Both Matthew and Mark record that it was then that Jesus was offered '*wine mingled with gall*', and that, having tasted it, He refused it.

Both Gospel writers also tell us that some hours later, having endured the agony of crucifixion, Jesus cried, "*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani*". Immediately after this, someone dipped a sponge in sour wine and raised it on a reed to His parched lips. This time He accepted the drink, and then '*dismissed His spirit*'.

### **What was the difference?**

Why did he decline the first drink and then accept the second? The first offer, made just before they crucified Him, was a genuine act of compassion. It was a kindly gesture, usually made by certain compassionate people on such occasions, to prisoners who were about to suffer the intense agony of crucifixion, and was most probably funded by women of Jerusalem. Its purpose is obvious. It was done in order to induce stupor – to dull the senses of the condemned prisoner, so that their dying would be less painful – a kind of 'euthanasia', we might say.

Notice, too, the imperfect tense of the word '*gave*' in '*gave him*', (or, in the R.S.V., '*offered him*'), means, '*they tried to give him*'. The words expressed a sense of concern! They *urged it upon Him*. But, having tasted it, He declined to drink it. He refused it because the wine contained either Hemlock, or, according to Matt.27:34 Gall - the Gall, which, in Bible times was the juice of the opium poppy. Both were powerful tranquilizers.

Jesus knew what was being offered to Him. He would be well aware of the custom, and He also recognized the sympathy this act revealed. So He tasted, acknowledging the kindness. But did not drink. He had committed Himself to doing the will of the Father in becoming the sin-bearer for the whole world, and He would not accept anything that prevented Him from bearing the full weight of the burden of mankind's sin.

It was after the second drink had been offered to Him, and accepted by Him, that He cried "*Tetelestai*" – one word – which, in English has been rendered, "*It is has been accomplished!*" This was His shout of triumph, which indicated that the price of our redemption had been paid. But this time, the drink offered was different. It contained no opiate; no drug. Nothing to dull the senses. What they offered to him was, in fact, the sour wine which was the common, daily drink of the Roman soldiers. It is even probable that it was one of the soldiers who made this kindly gesture. And this time the drink was accepted, because the great work had been done.

### **The Christian View**

Christians have always held the view that one does not have the right to take what he is unable to give. Job's observation, when contemplating the catastrophes that had befallen his own family, was, "**The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD**", and for this we read, "**in all this Job sinned not, nor charged God foolishly.**" (Job 1; 21-22) We should remember that the Lord said, "**My sheep hear my voice. I know them and they follow me. I give to them eternal life and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand. My Father who gave them to me is greater than all; and no-one can pluck them out of my Father's hand.**" (John 10; 27-29).

Do we believe that, as children of God, we are in the Father's hand? It is surely impossible for anyone who believes the Saviour's words, to calmly and soberly contemplate ending his own life, or seeking the help of others for the same purpose.

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