

# The Gospel and Voluntary Assisted Dying

Voluntary Assisted Dying (VAD) promises a ‘good death’ to those who are fearful and suffering in the face of death. The legalisation of VAD is a major topic of our time, discussed in both public and private spaces, amongst unbelievers and believers. As VAD legislation comes into effect in Victoria and bills are being placed before Australian parliaments, the issue is becoming an increasingly important one.

This paper addresses the topic of VAD with two purposes in mind. Firstly, to help believers understand the vision of a ‘good death’ in our community and the powerful assumptions driving the desire for VAD. Secondly, to help believers show our community a vastly better vision of a ‘good death’ shaped by the good news of Jesus Christ.

While euthanasia is a major issue of debate, and one on which Christians often speak publicly, the discussion is, at heart, about the very personal experience of suffering, dying and mourning. Therefore, the GiST team’s prayer is that this paper will help believers trust Jesus in the face of death; lovingly and courageously speaking gospel truth into all discussions on this topic; and bringing gospel hope to both unbelievers and believers dealing with the harsh reality of death.

Don’t be put off by the length of this paper! You can navigate its contents as follows:

1. **Definitions**
2. **Summary**
3. **The Good Death of the West** – common reasons for desiring VAD
4. **The Good Death in Christ** – facing suffering and death in the gospel
5. **Frequently Asked Questions** – includes suggestions for engagement with unbelievers
6. **Ideas for Prayer**
7. **Helpful Resources**

## 1. Definitions

Definitions are important in VAD discussions as vague terminology can disguise the nature of the practices being discussed.

**Euthanasia** – is an act where a doctor intentionally ends the life of a person by the administration of drugs, at that person’s voluntary and competent request.

**Physician Assisted Suicide (PAS)** – is where a doctor intentionally helps a person to commit suicide by providing drugs for self-administration, at that person’s voluntary and competent request. Here the doctor is distanced from the act but the motivation and intended outcome are the same as euthanasia. PAS is increasingly called ‘Assisted Dying’.

The meaning of **Voluntary Assisted Dying (VAD)** is not stable. Sometimes it refers to PAS, other times it encompasses both PAS and euthanasia.<sup>1</sup> The term is increasingly used in parliamentary le-

---

<sup>1</sup> Megan Best, ‘Assisted Dying Laws: Is Suffering Still the Main Problem’, *CASE Magazine*, 49: 2017, p. 9.  
David Jones, ‘Assisted Dying: Law and Practice Around the World (August 2015), <https://www.bmj.com/content/351/bmj.h4481/rr-0>

gislation and in the media, particularly by VAD proponents. It is an example of the way language is used to make killing and suicide sound more palatable.<sup>2</sup>

*For the sake of simplicity, the term 'VAD' will be used as an umbrella term for both euthanasia and PAS in this paper.*

**Withdrawal of Treatment** – a decision made by a person who does not have long to live along with their doctor to either cease or opt to not start life-prolonging treatment. This includes the cessation of life support.<sup>3</sup> This may be done because a treatment aimed at cure either no longer works or because the burden of side-effects (eg. nausea) may be so great that it cancels out any benefits of treatment. Such treatment could be said to be artificially postponing death. Note that the focus is on whether the treatment is worthwhile, not whether the life of the patient is worthwhile. Withdrawal of treatment is different to euthanasia or PAS because the intention is not to actively kill the patient but to allow the underlying disease to take its course.

**Palliative Care** – the medical care of the terminally ill with the aim of achieving adequate symptom control, in ongoing communication with the patient. Note that the administration of morphine and sedation in palliative care is sometimes called 'passive' or 'slow euthanasia', because of the mistaken belief that morphine shortens life. See FAQ for more details on the safe use of morphine and terminal sedation.

## **2. Summary**

The key question before us is this:

**How can a compassionate community insist that a person continue to endure the suffering of dying when VAD provides a way out?**

An increasingly common belief in our community that VAD does provide a compassionate way out of the suffering of dying. This is a belief is fuelled by experiences of real pain shaped by some more fundamental beliefs:

- This life is all there is. There is all there is no greater significance to life beyond achieving our desires now.
- Dying is always a frightening, painful process to be avoided at all costs.
- Death itself can provide a way out of suffering and the dying process.
- It is good for a person to be able to choose his or her time of death if life seems no longer worth living. Compassion demands allowing such a choice. Human dignity is bound up in an individual's freedom to choose.
- It is good for our community to allow some people choose VAD.

---

<sup>2</sup> Howard Manns, 'The fear that dare not speak its name: how language plays a role in the assisted dying debate' (November 2017), <https://theconversation.com/the-fear-that-dare-not-speak-its-name-how-language-plays-a-role-in-the-assisted-dying-debate-86308>

<sup>3</sup> Megan Best, 'The Ethical Dilemmas of Euthanasia', *CASE Magazine*, 25:2010, p. 5.

- However, Christians speak a very different message: a compassionate community maximises care for the suffering and dying person, trusting in Jesus as the only way through and out of suffering. God's Word says:
- Humans are not autonomous beings but wholly dependent on the life-giving generosity of God. We have been made to enjoy Him and thrive in obedience to His Him. Every person, every life, every death and every decision we make is significant to Him because we are God-made and God-purposed. We are also made to thrive within interdependent human relationships, honouring and caring for one other as God-made and purposed. Our interdependence means that our individual decisions profoundly impact others.
- This life is not all there is. Our life now and after death is in the hands of God. Trying to wrest control over our life and death from God is an expression of defiance towards Him. The universal human desire for self-rule leads to self-centred relationships and profound suffering. It deserves His judgement. Death and the subsequent eternal punishment of separation from God is His punishment for self-rule. Thus, death in and of itself does not release us from suffering.
- Only God can provide our release from judgement and eternal death. In love He chose to do so through Jesus Christ. Jesus stepped into the sombre reality of earthly life, tended to those who were suffering and despairing, loved those who felt alone, and used His authority to conquer death. He submitted to death on the cross and then declared His triumph over death in His resurrection. Only through turning from self-rule and trusting in Jesus' death and resurrection on our behalf can our suffering be fully relieved after death. Trusting Jesus, therefore, provides hope, relationship, comfort and perspective through suffering. A 'good death' is only found in Jesus.
- To act with compassion means pointing those who are suffering and dying to true release in Jesus. This involves affirming the value of every person by showing them unconditional and generous care to the end of their lives. Medical care is one of God's gifts for helping and restoring people according to His design. High quality palliative care can help the vast majority of people die comfortably and quietly.
- It is not good for our community to allow some people to choose VAD. While it may provide a choice for some, there is real danger that vulnerable people will die against their will.

### **3. The Good Death of the West**

The practice of hastening a patient's death has been prohibited in the West for over 2000 years. This raises a puzzling question: why does VAD seem to be such a good idea *now* when we have more medical treatments to ease suffering than ever before?<sup>4</sup> This section will explore Western 'cultural story' which underpins the desire for VAD in our community and which also influences our own thoughts and desires as Christians more than we realise.

#### **a. The Terror of Dying**

Death is so terrifying to us in our society that we typically flee from it. We rarely see people die. We rarely think about death until it suddenly lands upon us. In modern Australia, death happens more often in institutions than at home. It is generally professionals who see and touch the body.

---

<sup>4</sup> Megan Best, 'Assisted Dying Laws: Is Suffering Still the Main Problem', p. 9.

We no longer walk past family graves in the churchyard. Funerals have morphed into more upbeat, coffin-less ‘memorial’ or ‘celebration’ services in which talk of death and eternal realities is replaced by memory sharing.

It is odd, therefore, that a practice which causes death is attractive in a culture that reflexively flees from death. However, for many in our community, the process of dying has come to hold greater terror than death itself. Those who seek VAD fear a dying process full of hopelessness, unbearable suffering and dependence. Unbearable suffering includes physical suffering eg. tiredness, pain and loss of bodily function. However, the emotional and psychological suffering associated with an irrevocably changed sense of self and loss of independence increasingly drives the desire for VAD. It is also notable how often social isolation — a sense of being rejected, forgotten and without value in others’ lives — magnifies this sense of hopelessness.<sup>5</sup>

It is little recognised that requests for VAD are unusual even in those countries where it is legal. Generally, the dying desire more time not less.<sup>6</sup> It is also notable that we rarely hear about those who die quietly and comfortably, knowing the love of family and friends and with good medical care. The wider community has overwhelmingly adopted a view of the dying process as terrifying, fuelled by a profound fear of suffering and dependence. Personal stories in the media reinforce this. Firefighter Troy Thornton used VAD in Switzerland while still in the early stages of a neurodegenerative illness, fearing becoming ‘a vegetable’.<sup>7</sup> Andrew Denton’s experience of his father’s death and its ‘shocking brutality’ fuelled his public campaign to legalise VAD.<sup>8</sup>

These stories demand our compassion. However, they also prompt us to ask why suffering and dependence are so terrifying to us? And why is hastening death seen as the compassionate response?

## b. The Terror of Suffering

According to Tim Keller ‘we are more shocked and undone by suffering than were our ancestors. Westerners are peculiarly traumatised by suffering.’<sup>9</sup> Most cultures over time have accepted suffering as painful yet meaningful in light of life beyond death. The common secular view, however, says that there is no greater story that extends beyond our lives, nor any revelation from outside ourselves regarding the significance of life and suffering. There is no sense of living in awe before God — only seeking our own sense of personal well-being. The only reality is the material world. Life is about finding comfort, health, safety, control, happiness and fulfilment *now*. Therefore, there is no purpose in suffering. It is not an opportunity or a test or a step on a path and it carries no meaning within a greater narrative of life.

---

<sup>5</sup> MK Dees, MJ Vernooij-Dassen, WJ Dekkers, KC Vissers & C Van Weel, 'Unbearable suffering': a qualitative study on the perspectives of patients who request assistance in dying', [Journal of Medical Ethics, 37 \(12\), 2011, pp. 727-34.](#)

Naomi Richards, 'Assisted Suicide as a Remedy for Suffering? The End-of-Life Preferences of British "Suicide Tourists"', *Medical Anthropology: Cross-Cultural Studies in Health and Illness*, 36 (4), 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Megan Best, 'Euthanasia' (October 2016), <https://freedomforfaith.org.au/library/euthanasia>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-02-23/australian-firefighter-dies-in-swiss-euthanasia-clinic/10843092>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.nowtolove.com.au/celebrity/celeb-news/andrew-denton-i-watched-my-father-die-an-agonising-death-9966>

<sup>9</sup> Tim Keller, *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering*, Riverhead Books: USA, 2013.

Indeed, forty years ago anthropologist Phillip Reiff observed that Western culture was morphing into a ‘therapeutic society’ in which, in the absence of any greater spiritual context, the highest goal of life is to maximise pleasure and minimise pain.<sup>10</sup> This is what we are seeing now. In a therapeutic society, the greatest threat to us is to have a life in which pain outweighs pleasure. Novelist Michel Houellebecq writes:

*[...] A time will come when the sum of pleasures that life has left to offer is outweighed by the sum of pain (one can actually feel the meter ticking, and it ticks inevitably towards the end). This weighing up of pleasure and pain which, sooner or later, everyone is forced to make, leads logically, at a certain age, to suicide.<sup>11</sup>*

If life is all about quality of life now, the most important thing is that it ends comfortably before the weight of pain becomes too heavy. Compassion, that gut response to seeing another suffering, says that the only thing to be done with suffering is to get rid of it by whatever means possible.

### c. The Terror of Dependence

The desire for VAD is also driven by the fear of losing independence and control. We fear being dependent on others to feed us, clothe us, communicate and make decisions for us. We dread having our ability to choose and to act upon our choices limited. We dread having no room for choice. We also dread limiting someone else’s choices by being a burden on them.

The opposite of dependence, according to the cultural story of the West, is freedom. We love the word ‘freedom’ and its redolent connotations of transcending present burdens for something better. Following the Western libertarian tradition, freedom is to be found in autonomy, that is, self-rule. The fingerprints of individualism are all over this concept of freedom. We are truly free when we can be self-creators and masters of our own destiny, deciding for ourselves who we want to be and what we want to do without the imposition of others’ values or restrictions.<sup>12</sup> Remember John Stuart Mill’s classic libertarian statement:

*The only freedom which deserves the name is that of pursuing our own good in our own way, so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs or impede their efforts to attain it.*

If this is how we think about freedom, it’s only natural that we should be free to die when and how we choose. Indeed, a rallying cry for VAD is ‘My Life, My Death, My Choice.’

### d. Human Dignity and Choice

Independence and the freedom to choose the way we die are at the heart of a third, and very important, idea in VAD discussions – human dignity. Like ‘freedom’, the word ‘dignity’ has a comprehensive, powerful and yet hazy feel to it. It denotes an inherent quality that sits at the heart of what makes each person precious and worthy of respect. In much contemporary talk, dignity is closely wedded to self-rule. This means, firstly, that our dignity can be lost or damaged if our abilities, freedoms, independence or physical and mental ‘intactness’ are eroded; secondly, choosing

<sup>10</sup> Phillip Reiff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*, University of Chicago Press, 1987.

<sup>11</sup> Michel Houellebecq, *Atomised*, Vintage: England, 2001, p. 297.

<sup>12</sup> Richard Bauckham, *God and the Crisis of Freedom: Biblical and Contemporary Perspectives*, Westminster John Knox Press, USA, 2002.

our manner of death is seen as an important expression of dignity. A 'good death' is one in which the 'indignity' of suffering and dependence is avoided, and the 'dignity' of choice is preserved.

### e. Death as the Way Out of Dying

If this life is all there is, the nothingness of death seems a 'way out' from the terror of suffering and losing control.<sup>13</sup>

In previous centuries in the West, the 'aesthetic' of dying focussed on preparing to meet God as loved ones prayerfully accompany the dying person to the door of heaven.<sup>14</sup> Now the aesthetic of dying is to finish a good, comfortable life with a good, comfortable death that involves minimal 'dying'.<sup>15</sup> For example, writer Gillian Mears describes her ideal death as a pleasurable slipping into unconsciousness:

*If you've ever been put under a general anaesthetic, isn't it a marvellous thing? In the hands of a kind anaesthetist [...] joking about the moment as the needle slides in being like a loving merlot; a good South Australian shiraz. What a bold wonder it is, that whole process. Out like a light.*<sup>16</sup>

Sometimes, death may be vaguely conceived as a sentimentalised 'better place' in order to soften the spectre of nothingness. But to die is essentially to retreat into nothingness.

In summary, the cultural story of the West tends to see the highest goal in life as maximising comfort and avoiding the indignity of suffering and dependence by whatever means possible. Therefore, when faced with dying, compassion may well demand that the door of death be forced open to provide a way out.

To people of the West, VAD makes sense.

## 4. The Good Death in Christ

Now let us turn to a very different account of 'a good death' flowing from a very different story of human dignity, freedom, relationships and hope in suffering. The Biblical story of humanity challenges the deepest assumptions and values of our society today, uncovering infinitely greater treasures to cling to as we face death. This section will explore the features of a 'good death' in Christ.

<sup>13</sup> Gilbert Meilaender, *Bioethics: A Primer*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.: USA, 2013, p. 62.

<sup>14</sup> Rob Moll, *The Art of Dying: Living Fully in the Life to Come*, IVP: USA, 2010,

<sup>15</sup> Richards, 'Assisted Suicide as a Remedy for Suffering? The End-of-Life Preferences of British "Suicide Tourists'

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/food-and-wine-for-the-spirit-not-just-the-body-as-i-ponder-a-way-to-die-20130217-2el37.html>

## a. Depending on the God who Gives

If we understand freedom as the ability to will for ourselves what we want to be and do, we firstly need to ask whether we really possess that kind of freedom? Can we be independent self-creators?

We are certainly able to make many choices and control many things. We rightly encourage children to grow into the relative independence of adulthood. But there is so much in our lives that we don't choose or control such as our names, parents, skin colour and teachers. In fact, our ability to grow up and make good choices was enabled and nurtured by those who influence we never chose. As adults we are constantly dependent on the skills and good will of countless others and they on us. We do not have the radical freedom of self-creators. We are profoundly interdependent. There can be frustrations and dangers to this interdependence but also a great, enabling goodness to it.

However, our deepest and most fundamental dependence is on the God who made us and the world. He gives us life with lavish generosity. As Paul says:

*And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. <sup>26</sup> From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. <sup>27</sup> [...] <sup>28</sup> 'For in him we live and move and have our being. (Acts 17:25-28)*

God's most lavish provision for us is His Son, Jesus Christ. In Jesus we see God's generosity in brightest colours. Even a cursory glance through the Gospels reveal the enabling, releasing power of Jesus as he tends to those oppressed by suffering, evil and death, expelling demons, healing the sick, raising the dead, calming a deadly storm and forgiving the guilty. Only Jesus has the power to effect such life-giving release and that is precisely what He came to do – 'to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death' (Luke 1:79). Dependence on Jesus for truth, life, comfort and hope in the face of suffering and death should be wholeheartedly embraced!

## b. God Gives Us Dignity

Being God's utterly dependent creatures, the essence of our human nature, our true 'selves' are crafted by Him. Firstly, we see that human beings consist of both body and spirit. In Genesis 2:7, God makes man from the dust of the ground and then breathes life into him, creating a dual but integrated nature (Matt 10:28, 1 Timothy 4:8). We are not merely material beings seeking material comfort in the now but spiritual beings in intimate relationship with our Creator.

Secondly, we see that there is a purpose in God's design for human beings. When God speaks human beings into existence He says:

*So God created mankind in his own image,  
in the image of God he created them;  
male and female he created them. (Gen 1v26)*

We have been made 'in' or 'according to' God's own image, with the distinctive mark of God in us, custom made for the purpose or destiny of imaging Him. Only one human being, Jesus Christ, *actually is the image* of the invisible God (Col 1:15). Indeed, when Jesus, who is God, became a man, permanently joining God to humanity in His person, and then died and rose to gather human be-

ings together in Him as rulers over God's creation in the heavenly age (Ephesians 1), human dignity could not have been more clearly proclaimed! So, to be more precise, God's design for His creatures is that we grow to trust and respond to God as Jesus does eg. Romans 8:29-30. Our purpose is not to be autonomous mini-gods but, at the fundamental level, to find our being, destiny and comfort in hearing God's life-generating voice and responding with full obedience. Our dignity is rooted in this God-given purpose.

Early in the biblical story, however, Satan appears and advocates a counter-story of autonomy rather than trust in the Creator (Genesis 3). The earliest human beings listen to his voice and reject God's purposes for them. We will soon see the consequences of this. At this point, though, we need to see that, despite this rebellion, every individual person continues to be marked with the dignity of a God-generated blueprint.<sup>17</sup> This blueprint and its dignity is not cancelled by this rejection (1 Cor 11:7). Indeed, in Genesis 9:5-6, the life of person must not be taken away because 'God made man in his own image.' This prohibition on murder echoes throughout the Bible (Exodus 21:13, Matt 5:21, Rom 13:9). James even laments the evil of cursing people who are made in the likeness of God (James 3:9).

Therefore, a person's dignity isn't tied to his or her autonomy and it isn't attached to a capacity that can be taken away, even by the ravages of terminal illness. It does not vary according to level of dependence or quality of life or ability. No life can be declared worthless. Dignity is not something we can define in isolation from God because it is bound up in our relationship to Him. To sit at a dying woman's bedside and show her dignity means to do whatever we can, no matter what her condition, to honour her as God-made, tending to both body and spirit, knowing that her premium good and hope is found in God's love in Jesus.

### **c. God Gives Us the Bigger Vision of Our Lives and Predicament**

#### **i. Jesus - humanity at its best**

In both living and dying, therefore, God calls on us to treasure His Word on who we are, where we're headed and what is of premium value, not our own word. Jesus, the perfect man, shows us this when He endures a dire situation of life and death hunger in terrible isolation.

In Luke 4:1-13, Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness and, after forty days alone and without food, the devil suggests, true to form, that Jesus should take things into His own hands in this seemingly God-forsaken place. The devil says 'you have amazing powers as the Son of God, why not use them to make yourself some bread.' But Jesus says 'no'. His concern is for more than just His immediate hunger, it is for the Lord whose provision of life is more fundamental than merely food. He will not short-circuit God's plan of provision in order to serve Himself. The devil then treats Jesus to a dazzling display of power and comfort that could be His if He would simply reach out and take it for Himself. But again, Jesus says 'no'. Only the Lord can give life and is worthy of trust – the Lord only will He serve. A third time the devil urges Jesus to throw Himself down from the pinnacle of the temple to prove that God can rescue Him. Jesus refuses to force God's care on His own terms – He will trust in God keeping His promises in His own time.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> John Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny: Humanity in the Image of God*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company: USA, 2015, p. 147.

<sup>18</sup> Darrell Bock, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, Baker Books: Michigan, 1994, p. 363ff



Amidst desperate suffering and the devil's compelling urgings, Jesus holds fast to a vision that extends far beyond the present situation and all its sensations. He holds fast to the Lord who gives life and whose promises can be trusted to deliver Him at the perfect time. He refuses to take matters into His own hands, even in desperation, because He loves His Father and knows that the devil's promises are dead ends. He shows us that there is something worse than suffering and that is disobeying the Lord. He shows that only obedience brings sweet release - that there is infinitely greater comfort in the Lord's long-term purposes than there is in a short cut fix for suffering. Indeed, Jesus displays with utter assurance that life is charged with magnificent purpose – hearing the Father's life-generating voice and responding with life-embracing obedience.

## ii. **Autonomy – humanity at its worst**

Jesus is freely able to obey God's voice with a consistency, passion and determination that eludes us. We are not like Jesus. We don't respond to God's voice with wholehearted obedience. We intuitively take matters into our own hands.

In the Parable of the Lost Son (Luke 15:11-32), a son demands freedom from His father's household. We can almost hear him say 'my life, my choices' as he walks off. But his life free of his father becomes one of slavery. When his money is gone, he is forced to hire himself out to an employer who cares nothing for him, and he is reduced to eating with the pigs. The irony is that when we turn away from the Father to seek personal autonomy, we do not free ourselves but rather enslave ourselves to any number of unworthy, deceitful human masters.

Indeed, we can be slaves to the dominant voices and ideologies around us. We are slaves of our own inner compulsions and God-defying decisions – and the victims of those of others. Our slavery to selfishness tears relationships apart and leaves people vulnerable. When self-interest is at stake, human beings have the persistent habit of acting with self-justifying self-centredness, particularly towards the vulnerable.

Indeed, the notion of 'freely choosing' VAD is an illusion. As doctor and philosopher Jeffrey Bishop points out, social structures strongly influence and constrain people's choices. When a dying or elderly person senses the hard work of care for herself and everyone around her, and VAD is presented as valid choice, we are deceiving ourselves to think that doesn't put pressure on her to 'choose' it.<sup>19</sup>

Our predicament is that we are not free masters of our own destinies but slaves to the entangling web of human self-rule, known as sin. Death is not merely bodily expiration but an ongoing penalty for sin. Seeking to live apart from the life-giving God in pride and self-sufficiency leads rightly and inevitably to both physical and spiritual death (Romans 6:20-21). The terror of our lives is that we cannot escape the death we deserve. And, whether we recognise it or not, beyond physical death God will justly judge self-ruling choices (Hebrews 9:27). Jesus is clear that that the punishment for self-rule will be an ongoing, terrible experience – not a permanent state of unconsciousness (Matt 25:30, 2 Thess 1:9, Jude 6).

Therefore, we can never see death in and of itself as a good 'way out' of suffering, and suicide as an expression of freedom. Suicide is a form of self-murder (Ex 21:13), a denial of our dignity as

---

<sup>19</sup> Jeffrey Bishop, 'The Hard Work of Dying: Refusing the False Logic of Physician Assisted Suicide' (July 2014) <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/the-hard-work-of-dying-refusing-the-false-logic-of-physician-ass/10099182>

God-purposed beings, a sinful choice to take matters into our own hands and appear before Him unbidden. Death itself will deliver no mercy or relief from pain. Death is the curse of our enslavement to sin, not a 'good' to be administered in compassion. In death, we all find ourselves in a terrible predicament, physically and spiritually, in desperate need of God's help and mercy.

In summary, we are vastly more dependent than we think we are. Most of all, we are dependent on the life-giving generosity of God in every way. Our dignity lies in our 'God-purposed' design. Jesus shows us that the Lord's purpose for our lives, even in awful circumstances, is not to take matters into our own hands but to hear His life-generating voice and respond with life-embracing obedience. However, unlike Jesus, we consistently fail to obey God. In death, therefore, we find ourselves in a terrible predicament.

#### **d. God Gives True Freedom**

The most striking feature of the Parable of the Lost Son is the welcoming, forgiving heart of the Father who celebrates the return of His son to the freedom of His household. In a striking counter story, we see here that autonomy brings enslavement and freedom is only found in forgiveness and Spirit-enabled obedience to the Father. Indeed, God's real-life Son Jesus weeps over our death and judgement (Luke 19:41-44; John 11:38-44) and came to bring us true freedom and solid hope, even in the darkest hour of our suffering and dying. It is only in Jesus that we can find something as strange as a 'good death'.

##### **i. In Jesus we are freed from the penalty and slavery of sin**

In Luke chapter 23, Jesus reveals the heart of the Father most clearly in His suffering and death on the cross for sinners. Jesus has gone before us and experienced death as we will. And yet His death was so much worse than ours because He bore the full penalty for our sin, enduring the turned back of His Father, winning full forgiveness and freedom from the penalty of sin for those who trust in Him (1 Peter 3:18).

Moreover, in Luke 24, God raised Jesus from the dead, declaring punishment for sin fully spent, the sting of death gone (1 Cor 15:54-57) and repentance and forgiveness of sins proclaimed (Luke 24:46-47). In his letter to the Galatians, Paul picks up on this news and declares: 'For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery' (Gal 5:1). With God's enabling Spirit within us, we are freed from enslavement to self-rule, we can hear God's life-generating voice, stand firm His full and free mercy, cling to the hope He provides, and begin to respond to Him with life-embracing obedience even in the most awful of circumstances.

##### **ii. In Jesus we will be freed from suffering – and we have His help now**

The 'good death' in Christ, therefore, is to die embracing dependence on the Father, knowing that death and judgement will not have the last word over us. Jesus has died and risen for our liberation from sin and death. In Jesus' care there is assurance of eternal life beyond death in the warm, freeing household of the Father, who will wipe away every tear from every eye and bring an end to death, suffering, mourning and pain (Revelation 21:1-4). Jesus will lead us into freedom from suffering and we long for it.

While we wait on God's timing to free us, we look to the Father for help. The Bible does not sentimentalise or minimise the awfulness of suffering but provides us with a repertoire of lament. As Christians we hate death and wholeheartedly lament the immense, daily fallout of sin. The Psalmist says:

*You have put me in the depths of the pit, in the regions dark and deep  
Your wrath lies heavy upon me, and you overwhelm me with all your waves.  
You have caused my companions to shun me; you have made me a horror to them.  
I am shut in so that I cannot escape; my eyes grow dim through sorrow (Psalm 88:6-9)*

Jesus has drawn these words of lament into His own experience, bearing God's wrath for us, becoming intimate with grief and sharing our suffering, in order to rescue and restore us eternally (Luke 19:24, 36). Therefore, in Jesus we can cry a similar lament over our suffering while being utterly assured that our Father embraces us with compassion. Jesus is our sympathetic high priest and brother who never stops interceding for us, drawing us before the throne of grace, day and night (Hebrews 4:14-16; 7:24-25). The Spirit intercedes for us, sharing our cries with groans too deep for words (Rom 8:26).

At the same time, we can know that, in God's hands, suffering is never a pointless black mark on our lives but steeped in purpose. Suffering never renders a life worthless. Suffering wrenches us out of complacency to see the truth of our helpless predicament. According to 2 Corinthians 4:10, in suffering we more deeply see and know our Saviour as we carry around the death of Jesus in our bodies. And as we grasp His death in ours, we grasp His life at work in us in spite of death, His power to free us where we are so obviously powerless and hope where we are exhausted and spent (v7-12). Our dying serves to show ourselves and each other the heavenly treasure we can grasp only in Jesus.

In His kindness, God also provides relief from suffering in many ways, not least of all through the gift of medical care. Good medical care doesn't facilitate autonomy but, respecting the 'God-purposed' nature of each person, treats and relieves pain, seeking to restore each body according to God's design.

### **iii. In Jesus we are freed to love through suffering**

In Galatians 5:13, Paul says:

*For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh but through love serve one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.'*

Jesus has set us free not to pursue self-rule and individual choice but to love others His way. Indeed, Jesus gives us a compelling example of love for the dying, even as He endures excruciating pain, when He tends to the thief on the cross beside Him. Rather than 'ending His misery' by bringing swift death, Jesus compassionately points him to where his suffering will be truly released: 'Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise' (Luke 23:43).

Here are some ways we can show love as we face death together:

- a. **We should never avoid the dying because dying is a time of enormous importance.** In previous centuries, Christians were often known for drawing close to the frail, vulnerable, dying and socially isolated. Now is a great time to reclaim that heritage. Dying provides a wonderful opportunity to draw near to another, opening up space to talk about the past and the present, and crying together. Compassion means listening to his flood of existential questions, opening the Bible (Romans 8, 1 John 1, Hebrews 4, Ephesians, Luke 23, Rev 21 are great passages to read), praying and even singing together, pointing him to forgiveness and the assurance of heaven in Jesus, Therefore, let's be seeking out opportunities to go into hospitals, aged care facilities and homes, and pointing the dying to true relief.
- b. **We should share the burdens of care in love.** Suffering and caring is deeply wearying work both for the sufferer and the family, friends and staff around her. However, God frees us to show love that is sincere and patient, gladly bearing one another's burdens, no matter how tiring or inconvenient (Gal 6:2; 1 Tim 5:3-8). We show love for a person as God-made when we hold her hand, rub her feet, mix her food, keep her mouth moist. We also show care when we support the provision of good palliative and medical care in our community.
- c. **In the gospel, Christians can turn away from autonomy and embrace interdependence.** There is enormous need for the young and healthy to learn from Christian brothers and sisters what it means to face suffering, dependence and death in Jesus. The dependent, sick, disabled, suffering and dying have a precious ministry to the church. We need to be hearing their stories of trust in Jesus rather than in despair in the face of thwarted self-rule. We need the frail and suffering to be visible in our churches, not hidden away behind the capable and strong, displaying the freedom found in Jesus rather than in human strength. We need to demonstrate clearly that, in Jesus, there is no such thing as a life that no longer has worth.

### **In summary...**

A truly 'good death' is one in which hope in Jesus is embraced. A person desiring a 'good death' acknowledges his complete dependence on the Lord, turns from self-rule to trust in Him, and clings to His promise of eternal freedom from sin and death through Jesus' death and resurrection. A 'good death' involves embracing interdependence, encouraging one another in eternal biblical truths and tending to frail bodies with Christlike patience and compassion.

## Frequently Asked Questions

### **Is it OK for a Christian to commit suicide when suffering become unbearable?**

It is important to carefully allow the Bible to speak to the person thinking about suicide and those who care for them. People, including Christians, commit suicide for many different and complex reasons. Every case is a tragedy which calls for deep compassion.

In the awful scene of the crucifixion, we clearly see that Jesus knows desperate isolation, deprivation and anguish intimately. He is, indeed, a brother who understands all we go through with profound compassion and empathy. But Jesus also lifts our eyes from our desperation to the Lord we can and must trust with our lives. Suicide is a form of self-murder (Ex 21:13), a sinful choice to take matters into our own hands rather than entrusting our destiny to Him, appearing before Him unbidden, denying His Lordship and the goodness of His timing.

It must be clearly said, though, that suicide is not an unforgivable sin as has been sometimes wrongly and tragically taught. God's capacious forgiveness in Jesus is bigger than all the sins of His children, even the ones that grip us in our final moments. However, we help those in despair by pointing them to their purpose in responding to God's merciful and loving lordship rather than encouraging suicide as a 'way out' of suffering. In Jesus, as we have seen, there is always hope for every person, even at the darkest hour.

### **How can I talk to an unbeliever about VAD in the way that points to the gospel?**

Talking about VAD is a great opportunity to talk to an unbeliever about life, death and the gospel.

Firstly, pray that God will open the way to gospel in your conversations.

Secondly, take time to ask what your conversation partner thinks about dying personally. Be curious, ask questions and listen humbly. What does he fear most about dying? What experiences of others dying has he had? What would make a 'good death' for her? Who can help her deal with death? What does she feel lies beyond death?

Thirdly, the best thing is to respond to her concerns talking about Jesus as directly as you can. We suggest using the summary points in section 2 of this paper. If it fits the moment, offer to pray for her.

Fourthly, take any opportunity to show Christlike, practical care.

### **How can Christians make a difference on this issue?**

Firstly, we can pray (see section 6 below for prayer suggestions).

Secondly, we can clearly and repeatedly speak about our gospel perspective on suffering and dying, showing Jesus to those who desperately need Him.

Thirdly we can take every opportunity to show whole person love to the frail, dependent, suffering and dying. See our suggestions in section 4.d.iii (In Jesus we are free to love through suffering) above.

Fourthly, we can treasure the frail, dependent, suffering and dying in our churches, valuing their lives as God does, learning from them how to face our own future trusting in Jesus rather than in self-mastery.

Fifthly, we can urge local MPs and policy makers to oppose the practice of VAD (see question below)

## **How can we care for health professionals in our churches?**

Health professionals face intense pressure in a culture which gives the facilitation of individual patient desires the last word over practitioner conscience. VAD is a particular challenge as it represents a fundamental shift away from the traditional values of healing and protecting human life from harm. In the context of legalised VAD, medical practitioners can be placed under pressure and even intimidation to provide VAD by patients, relatives, health care facility managers, fellow health care practitioners and the community at large.<sup>1</sup>

Most importantly, we can also encourage health professionals to provide skilful, Christ-honouring care (including palliative care) to their patients. Health professionals in our churches need Christian brothers and sisters to be interested in their work situations, share their burdens, pray with them and encourage them to hold fast to Christ with all wisdom and courage, especially when that means considerable sacrifice. We can also speak in support of legislation that allows for conscientious objection by health professionals (see the GiST submission on VAD for an example [www.gist.org.au](http://www.gist.org.au)).

## **Should Christians speak out against euthanasia? Isn't that imposing our values on the community?**

Christians approach the task of speaking into the public square on the topic of VAD in a variety of ways. Some feel passionately about the issue and are involved in political advocacy against, or perhaps sometimes for, VAD. Some feel uncomfortable about 'imposing our morality' on a nation that, on the whole, no longer shares our values. Some Christians are also hesitant about diverting scarce energy and resources away from gospel ministry. And some Christians feel it is a serious issue but simply don't have the time to speak or think further about it amidst life's competing demands.

The question of whether and how Christians should speak out on issues in the public square is an important but complex one. There are, however, some basic points to remember as we consider speaking out on VAD.

---

<sup>1</sup> K. Stevens, 'Emotional and psychological effects of physician-assisted suicide and euthanasia on participating physicians' in *Issues in Law and Medicine* 21(3) Spring 2006, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/16676767>

On the one hand, we shouldn't focus on political decision-making as the key way to address the VAD. What our community needs most is to have deeper issues of the heart addressed by the gospel.

On the other hand, our core focus on the gospel doesn't mean that we shouldn't be concerned for political expressions of care and justice in our community. The political sphere is not a moral and religious 'neutral zone'. All rulers are under God's authority and accountable to Him, even if most choose to ignore Him (Psalm 2, Romans 13:1,2; Rev 1:5). He cares about the decisions of governments and the welfare of those for whom they are responsible, especially the vulnerable. He will judge all rulers and nations according to His standards. And He encourages His people to show care for the needy and vulnerable in general (Deuteronomy 10:18; Micah 6:8; 1 Timothy 5:3-16).

Since God cares about righteous rule we should too. Knowing that God is sovereign, we do not try to coerce those in authority. But, as Christ's representatives, we should seek to protect and love our neighbours as we have opportunity to. We should pray for governments and authorities (1 Tim 1:2). We should also pray for and help Christians who shape policy in their workplaces. Within our democracy, we can speak to MPs, sign petitions, write submissions to government and participate in public discussions. We should certainly never encourage a government to support an unrighteous practice such as VAD (Rom 1:32). Our approach, however, will always be shaped by the Christ-like compassion for individuals, taking every opportunity to speak the gospel.

## **Why VAD is harmful to our community? How can we explain this to others such as our local MP?**

Here is an excerpt from the GiST submission to the QLD government Inquiry into aged care, palliative care and VAD (April 2019). We preceded these arguments by showing how our thinking is rooted in the gospel. You can see the submission in full on our website: [www.gist.org.au](http://www.gist.org.au). We encourage you to use this submission to guide your communication with your local MP.

**We urge that VAD not be allowed in Queensland in order to safeguard compassionate care for the suffering and vulnerable in our community.** Advocates of VAD argue that individual people should be able to choose the way in which they die. While we agree that the state should uphold considerable freedom of individual choice, this should not be upheld to the detriment of supportive and protective social relationships within Queensland communities.

**The current prohibition on taking the life of a person or enabling their suicide is a vital boundary for protecting people and relationships within our communities.** As a Christian denomination that cares for the elderly, sick and vulnerable in multiple ways, we hold reasonable and grave concerns that the legalisation of VAD, while opening up choice for a few, will have profoundly negative consequences for many in Queensland

Our main reasons for arguing this position are as follows:

- a. **While VAD legislation in Victoria and overseas seeks to ensure patients act without coercion, this does not take into account the subtle coercion that the choice of VAD itself creates.** Individual choices are profoundly shaped by social beliefs and structures. The process of VAD assessment supports those patients who adhere to VAD criteria in thinking that euthanasia or suicide is a valid and logical choice. This validation then creates tension within a health care culture that also seeks to honour and support life. Terminally ill patients will find themselves in a situation where hastening death is an option always at hand. They may well feel they need to defend to themselves and perhaps to others why they choose to stay alive, especially when they sense the burden of their

care on others. Indeed, the same may eventually be felt by those with long term disabilities and chronic illnesses. It is telling that while an increasingly large percentage of the population are in favour of VAD, a very much smaller percentage of terminally ill patients desire it. In the face of death, patients generally desire more time, not less.<sup>2</sup> No VAD legislation can ensure that the quiet concerns and doubts of older, vulnerable and disabled people are adequately heard, and their desires and choices protected.<sup>3</sup>

**b. No legal safeguards can fully guard against the abuse and misuse of Assisted Dying practices, including the occurrence of Involuntary Euthanasia.** Transgressions and loosening of legal requirements have been demonstrated in jurisdictions in which VAD is allowed.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, we must acknowledge that, in the real world, those health professionals, family and friends close to a terminally ill person may encourage and enable VAD for reasons of personal gain. No formal safeguards can prevent subtle or masked expressions of selfishness in the use of VAD.

**c. A community that supports VAD makes harmful assumptions about the nature of compassion and intolerable suffering.**

- Fear, a sense of isolation and existential suffering in the terminally ill are major drivers of requests for VAD. The compassionate response to those experiencing such suffering is not to allow a hastened death but to gather around them, tending to those needs and demonstrating the value of their lives. Indeed, our community would greatly benefit from recovering practices of generously and patiently attending to the dying, learning how to face our own deaths in the process. People are more than independent choice makers — they need loving relationships that provide physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual care in the face of death.
- A culture that allows VAD makes certain assumptions about what constitutes intolerable suffering and a life no longer worth living. In a society that values autonomy, independence, control and self-sufficiency,<sup>5</sup> those who are disabled, mentally ill, non-productive and dependent are easily judged to have intolerable lives. We argue, however, that vulnerability, interdependency and relationships of exchanging care are a natural part of flourishing human life. In both suffering and taking on the 'burden' of care for others, are opportunities for love, growth and finding meaning.

**d. Increased access to high quality palliative care rather than VAD is the compassionate response to suffering in our community.** Where good palliative care is available, the vast majority of patients receive the holistic care, including relational support and symptom control, needed to maximise quality of life as they die. Our responsibility as a community is not to attempt to minimise suffering by causing death, a practice that could all too easily substitute for the compassion, skill and relationships human beings need during the hardest moments of their lives.<sup>6</sup> Our responsibility is to minimise suffering through maximising care.

<sup>2</sup> Megan Best, 'Euthanasia' (October 2016) <https://freedomforfaith.org.au/library/euthanasia>

<sup>3</sup> Bishop, 'The Hard Work of Dying: Refusing the False Logic of Physician Assisted Suicide' (July 2014).

<sup>4</sup> J. Pereira, 'Legalizing euthanasia or assisted suicide: the illusion of safeguards and controls' in *Current Oncology* 18(2) April 2011, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3070710/>

- I. Tuffrey-Wijne, L. Curffs, I. Finlay and S. Hollins, 'Euthanasia and assisted suicide for people with an intellectual disability and/or autism spectrum disorder: an examination of nine relevant euthanasia cases in the Netherlands (2012–2016)' in *BMC Medical Ethics* 19(17), 2018. <https://bmcmethics.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12910-018-0257-6>

<sup>5</sup> D. Fleming, 'The compassionate state? Voluntary Assisted Dying, neoliberalism and the problem of virtue without an anchor' (March 2019) <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/compassionate-state-voluntary-assisted-dying-neoliberalism-and/10937504>

<sup>6</sup> Megan Best, 'Euthanasia' (October 2016), <https://freedomforfaith.org.au/library/euthanasia>



## Do morphine and terminal sedation hasten death?

It is important for both patients and doctors to make use of the best palliative medications while also having confidence that these do not hasten death.

When **morphine** is administered at therapeutic levels, within regular practice guidelines and by experienced practitioners, it does not shorten life but provides excellent pain relief.<sup>7</sup> In fact, it may lengthen life through relieving patient distress. Morphine can hasten death only when given in inappropriately high doses.

Likewise, carefully titrated doses of **sedation** may also be given to relieve delirium or agitation in the final stages of dying without hastening death. At that stage, patients may well have ceased eating and drinking and have reduced consciousness.<sup>8</sup> Some caution must be exercised with the use of 'terminal sedation' however. Consciousness is good for the dying. It is necessary for enjoying relationships and tending to emotional and spiritual needs. Therefore, sedation should only be used if the patient's symptoms are refractory to all other treatment. Minimal doses should be used to enable relief of specific symptoms while maximising consciousness where possible. Sedation can also be used intermittently providing opportunities for waking.<sup>9</sup>

## Ideas for Prayer

- **Praise** the Lord who gives us life and dignity; who has freed us from sin and death through the death and resurrection of His Son Jesus; who in Jesus gives us heavenly hope beyond death; who yearns over our souls and shows compassion to us in our suffering
- **Lament** the curse of sin, the suffering of death, the desire for self-rule that refuses to glorify the Lord and harms the vulnerable
- **Confess** our own desire for self-rule, our failure to honour our Father and our selfish neglect of others
- **Repent**, asking Him to help us turn from self-confidence and self-rule to obedience; to give us joy knowing His forgiveness; for intimate, enduring trust in Jesus through His Spirit when we face suffering and dying; and for His enabling to sacrificially share the burdens of those around us.
- **Request** that the Lord show saving mercy to those who are dying and their families; to grant Christ-centred knowledge and wisdom to health professionals and policy makers as they care for the suffering and dying; that He will be glorified and obeyed in our community.

<sup>7</sup> Megan Best, 'The Ethical Dilemmas of Euthanasia', p.5. P. D. Good, P. J. Ravenscroft, J. Cavenagh, 'Effects of opioids and sedatives on survival in an Australian inpatient palliative care population', *Internal Medicine*, 35 (9)15: Sep 2005, pp. 512-517. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1445-5994.2005.00888.x>

D. Mendelson, 'Quill, Glucksberg and Palliative care: does alleviation of pain necessarily hasten death', *Journal of Law and Medicine*, 5: 1997, pp. 110-113.

S. Trankle, 'Decisions that hasten death: double effect and the experience of physicians in Australia', *Biomed Central Medical Ethics*, 15 (26): 2014, pp. 1-15. Retrieved from: <http://www.biomedcentral.com/1472-6939/15/26>

<sup>8</sup> M. Maltoni C. Pittureri E. Scarpi L. Piccinini F. Martini P. Turci L. Montanari O. Nanni D. Amadori, 'Palliative sedation therapy does not hasten death: results from a prospective multicenter study', *Annals of Oncology*, 20 (7): July 2009, pp. 1163–1169, <https://cbhd.org/content/discerning-palliative-sedation-euthanasia-what%E2%80%99s-stake-human-dignity>

<sup>9</sup> Daniel Sulmasy, 'The last low whispers of our dead: when is it ethically justifiable to render a patient unconscious until death?', *Theoretical Medicine and Bioethics* 39: 2018, pp. 233-263.

## **Helpful Resources**

Subscribe to the GiST newsletter - <http://www.gist.org.au/contact/>

Watch Michelle's personal testimony living and dying in Jesus on the GiST website - <http://www.gist.org.au/2017/06/28/living-and-dying-well-in-jesus/>

Michael Horton, *A Place for Weakness*, Zondervan: USA, 2006.

Tim Keller, *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering*, Riverhead Books: USA, 2013.

John Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny: Humanity in the Image of God*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company: USA, 2015.

Gilbert Meilaender, *Bioethics: A Primer*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.: USA, 2013

Rob Moll, *The Art of Dying: Living Fully in the Life to Come*, IVP: USA, 2010.

Vaughan Roberts, *Assisted Suicide*, The Good Book Company: UK, 2017. See <https://www.thegood-book.com.au/assisted-suicide>

John Wyatt, *Matters of Life and Death: Human Dilemmas in the light of the Christian faith*, IVO: England, 2009.

The Gospel, Society and Culture Committee for PCNSW has produced this paper on euthanasia - <http://gsandc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/GSC-PAS-resource-paper-1.pdf>