

Deaths of Despair and Spirituality
Proverbs 23:7

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Part of a pastor's job is to study and teach. Another part of his job is to illustrate the use of Bible information as applied to real-life situations.

Suicide and related deaths are an increasing problem and have been coming to my attention.

It pains me to hear of teens committing suicide or even to attempt or think about suicide. Even teenagers who profess to know Jesus as Savior have either taken their own lives or tried to. Why are they in such despair?

The CDC, has documented this trend from a statistical perspective. From an article on the CDC website from 2018:

“Suicide is a leading cause of death in the US. Suicide rates increased in nearly every state from 1999 through 2016. Mental health conditions are often seen as the cause of suicide, but suicide is rarely caused by any single factor. In fact, many people who die by suicide are not known to have a diagnosed mental health condition at the time of death. Other problems often contribute to suicide, such as those related to relationships, substance use, physical health, and job, money, legal, or housing stress. Making sure government, public health, healthcare, employers, education, the media and community organizations are working together is important for preventing suicide. Public health departments can bring together these partners to focus on comprehensive state and community efforts with the greatest likelihood of preventing suicide.” <https://www.cdc.gov/vitalsigns/suicide/index.html>

Typical human viewpoint. There is a spiritual dimension that is being ignored.

From a freelance reporter, Murray Hunter, Jul 6, 2022:

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“Since the beginning of 2022, there has been a significant rise in excess deaths. Covid-19 has made up only a small percentage of these excess deaths. Excess deaths is a measurement of the number of deaths from all causes above what we would expect, based upon a five year rolling average. The mainstream media is not carrying this story, even though this is a major concern to public health.”

<https://murrayhunter.substack.com/p/the-unexplained-rise-in-excess-deaths>

A note on the “substack.com” website. “Substack lets independent writers and podcasters publish directly to their audience and get paid through subscriptions.”

Overt suicides are easily tracked. Self-inflicted gunshots or poisonings or hangings or jumping off buildings/bridges. But there are other ways of committing suicide that are not so easy to track. For instance, drug overdoses done over a period of time and liver diseases caused by alcoholism. Someone called these “deaths of despair.”

Science News November 2, 2020.

(<https://www.sciencenews.org/article/deaths-of-despair-depression-mental-health-covid-19-pandemic>)

“The expression “deaths of despair” was born after Princeton University economist Anne Case and Angus Deaton — Case’s colleague, husband and a Nobel laureate in economics — dug into U.S. death statistics and found that, during the 1900s, people’s life spans had generally lengthened from roughly 50 years to nearly 80. But then, near the end of the century, one segment of the population took a U-turn. Since the 1990s, mortality had risen sharply among middle-aged, non-Hispanic white people, especially those without a college degree, Case and Deaton reported in December 2015 in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences.”

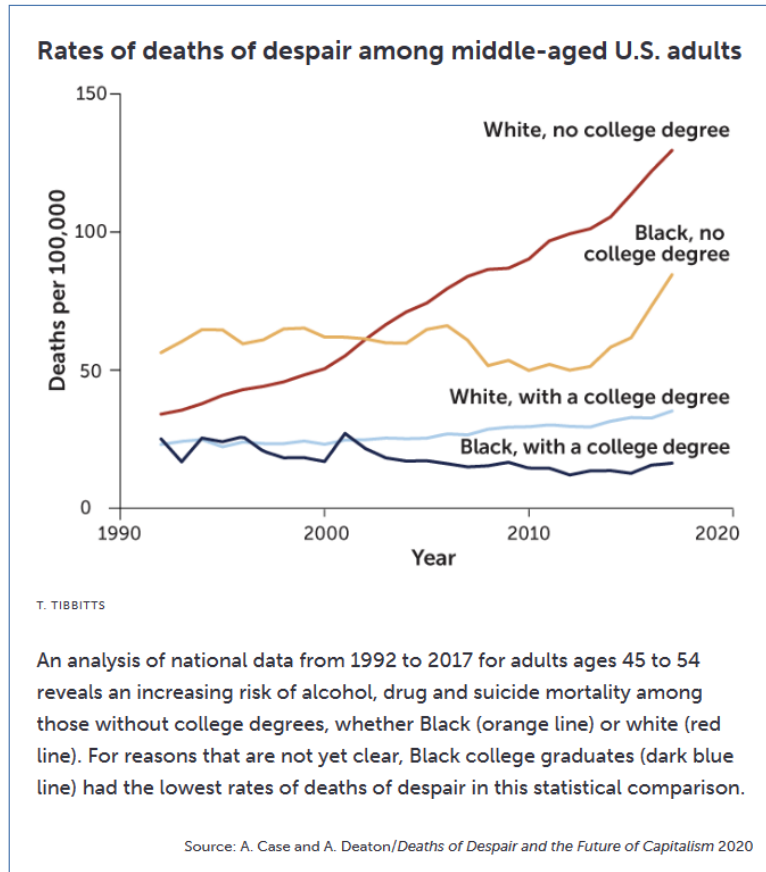
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“The reason, to a large extent: White, working-class people ages 45 to 54 were drinking themselves to death with alcohol, accidentally overdosing on opioids and other drugs, and killing themselves, often by shooting or hanging. Vanishing jobs, disintegrating families and other social stressors had unleashed a rising tide of fatal despair, Case and Deaton concluded. This disturbing trend mirrored what had previously occurred among inner-city Black people in the 1970s and 1980s, Case and Deaton now say. As low-skilled jobs vanished and families broke apart, Black victims of crack cocaine and the AIDS epidemic represented an early wave of deaths of despair. Even today, mortality rates for Black people still exceed those of white people in the United States for a variety of reasons, with Black overdose deaths on the rise over the last few years.”

““The most meaningful dividing line [for being at risk of deaths of despair] is whether or not you have a four-year college degree,” Deaton says.”

For those that like pictorials here is a graph showing this:

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<https://www.sciencenews.org/article/deaths-of-despair-depression-mental-health-covid-19-pandemic>

This study approaches the solutions from a human non-spiritual perspective. But there is a study that found a spiritual, or in it's term, "religious perspective."

From msn.com:

"So-called deaths of despair such as from suicide or alcohol abuse have been skyrocketing for middle-aged white Americans."

"It's been blamed on various phenomenon, including opioid abuse. But a new research paper finds a different culprit — declining religious practice."

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“The working paper, from Tyler Giles of Wellesley College, Daniel Hungerman of the University of Notre Dame, and Tamar Oostrom of The Ohio State University, looked at the relationship between religiosity and mortality from deaths of despair. The paper was circulated by the National Bureau of Economic Research.”

<https://www.msn.com/en-us/money/insurance/rise-in-middle-aged-white-deaths-of-despair-may-be-fueled-by-loss-of-religion-new-research-paper-argues/ar-AA16oX38>

What is the National Bureau of Economic Research:

“The National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) was founded in 1920, largely in response to heated Progressive-era controversies over income distribution. The two leading figures in its launch — Malcolm Rorty, an executive at the American Telephone and Telegraph Company, and Nachum Stone, a socialist labor organizer with a PhD in economics from Columbia University — had widely different views on many economic policy issues. They agreed, however, that there was little data on which to base discussions of these issues. With the support of a group of business and labor leaders, as well as university-based economists who were committed to uncovering and disseminating important facts about the economy of the United States, they created the NBER to address this information gap. To this day, NBER research is bound by a restriction that the founders imposed: studies may present data and research findings, but may not make policy recommendations or make normative statements about policy.”

<https://www.nber.org/about-nber/history>

The study itself can be found at: <https://www.nber.org/papers/w30840>

From the conclusion:

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“This paper explores the importance of culture in explaining recent trends in US mortality and the relationship between cultural institutions and well-being more generally. As noted by Ruhm (2021), the discussion of causes of these mortality trends should consider whether any social phenomena coincide or predate the changes in mortality. We show that the initial rise in deaths of despair in the US was preceded by a large decline in organized religious participation and that both trends were driven by white middle-aged Americans. We know of no other cultural phenomenon involving such large, widespread changes in participation prior to the initial rise in US mortality, nor do we know of any other phenomenon that matches the seemingly idiosyncratic patterns observed for mortality: seen for both men and women, but not in other countries, and in both rural and urban settings, but driven primarily by middle-aged, less educated white individuals. The decline in religiosity matches mortality trends in all these characteristics.”

“We also show that religiosity and the rate of deaths of despair are negatively correlated across states; states with high levels of religiosity have suffered less from mortality due to alcohol, suicides, or drug poisonings. This negative relationship also holds when we consider changes in religiosity and mortality. States that experienced larger decreases in religiosity have had the largest gains in the rate of deaths of despair.”

“Using shocks based on the repeal of blue laws, we then demonstrate that negative shocks to religious practice had relatively large impacts on deaths from poisonings, suicides, and liver cirrhosis for middle-aged Americans in the late 20th century. The impact that we witness seems to be driven by the decline in formal religious participation rather than in belief or personal activities like prayer. These results underscore the importance of cultural institutions such as religious establishments in promoting well-being. Whether other types of voluntary or community

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activities could have similar large-scale effects on health outcomes is unknown and represents an excellent topic for future research.”

From the Bible Church perspective, walking by faith with a relationship with God the Father through faith dependence on the Holy Spirit who takes us to Jesus Christ who takes us to God the Father is important for maintaining mental health.

Proverbs 23:7 For as he thinks within himself, so he is...

Proverbs 9:10 The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, And the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.

Proverbs 9:11 For by me your days will be multiplied, And years of life will be added to you.

Proverbs 9:12 If you are wise, you are wise for yourself, And if you scoff, you alone will bear it.