



## A Reason to Live: Understanding Suicide

Have you ever found yourself so disappointed with life that you secretly wondered, "What's the point of going on?" Have you felt so discouraged, so confused, so angry, so alone, so helpless, so hopeless, so full of pain and shame that you didn't know whether you wanted to live or die? Do those thoughts sometimes get such a grip on you that you find yourself obsessed with the thought of ending it all?

If so, you need to know that your despair may actually have brought you to the threshold of a new beginning. It may have prepared you for something far better than anything you have ever known before.



But first, it's important for you to know that in your pain ...

### ***You are not alone.***

Many people struggle daily with the same feelings that are tormenting you. We know this because the problem of suicide is of epidemic proportions in our society. The latest estimates are that every year at least 30,000 Americans choose to die by suicide. (Because of reporting difficulties, some feel that the number is actually closer to 100,000.) Then too, for every fatal suicide there are 10 unsuccessful attempts. That brings the total estimate to 300,000 attempted suicides every year in the United States alone! That means that more than 5 million Americans living today have attempted suicide. It's obvious that the pain tearing at your soul is more common than you may think.

That is a disturbing thought. Yet the very fact that you are still able to find it unsettling is a good sign. It means that you are not among those who have made their problems far worse through an irreversible act of self-destruction.



***You still have some options.***

You may think you have run out of options, but you haven't. You still have good choices that can bring meaning, purpose, and eventually even joy to the core of your soul. You have choices that can bring you from darkness into light, from anger into love, and from loneliness into the most important of all relationships. You may feel trapped, but you're not as trapped as you think. You just need to find that hidden passage, that blind doorway that has been eluding you.

How can you find that doorway? Well, one way is to follow your pain. You need to realize that:

***You are not wrong to feel hurt.***

It's all right to experience deep, soul-tearing pain. Pain, as terrible as it feels, is meant to be a messenger of mercy. Pain in our bodies alerts us to potential injury or sickness. Pain in our souls alerts us to spiritual needs.

You may be trying to escape that pain without hearing what it is trying to tell you. But that's like disconnecting the warning light on your car dashboard instead of finding out why it keeps coming on. Because this is such an important point, let's spend some more time with it.

People contemplating suicide are people in deep emotional pain. They are saying, "If this is what life has to offer, I don't want it. It just hurts too much to go on." Unfortunately, the intensity of your pain not only signals trouble inside, but it also can cause you to lash out at others--whether they have hurt you or not. I remember when my neighbor's dog was hit by a car. The pup, normally so friendly, was blinded by the agony of his broken hind legs. He lashed out at those who were trying to help. He acted the way we often do when we hurt. We tend to lash out at everyone, God and man included.

Because of their deep pain, suicidal persons are not thinking clearly. Their hurt distorts their vision. The result is similar to what we experienced as children when we looked through the wrong end of a pair of binoculars. The world we saw was very different. We saw only a small part of a world that had suddenly become distorted by the lens. Perspective was lost. If we tried to walk around like that, we found ourselves walking into walls that still looked far away.

In looking through the wrong end of the binoculars, the result was the pain of a bumped head or bruised shins. But when it comes to the agonizing pain of despair, it means:



***You are experiencing the results of a life plan that has fallen apart.***

In other words, you have been looking for life in all the wrong places. Two painful symptoms signal the

failure of this personal strategy: feelings of hopelessness and feelings of helplessness.

An overwhelming feeling of personal hopelessness grips our soul. This is more than just a shallow feeling of "nobody loves me, everybody hates me." It is a penetrating despair that says the people I have counted on have let me down. The hopes that I have banked on have left me bankrupt. No one in my world is going to provide for me what my heart deeply desires. It is the kind of despair David experienced when he wrote: *Look to my right and see; no one is concerned for me, I have no refuge, no one cares for my life. ... Listen to my cry, for I am in desperate need* (Ps. 142:4,6).

People who feel abandoned by their families and loved ones experience this deep sense of hopeless despair. A woman named Mary visited my office. Her comments signaled to me that her personal strategy and life plan had failed. "I have never felt loved by anyone in my whole life. My father sexually abused me for 10 years while I was growing up. I told my mother about it but she did nothing. My husband only wants a housemaid, a laundry woman, and a sex partner; he doesn't really want me just for being me. No one has ever wanted that. There has never been any love in our relationship since day one. I've given up on ever being loved by anyone." This hopelessness of ever being loved by others the way she wanted to be loved had pushed Mary to the edge of life.

All of us, if we are honest with ourselves, can identify with Mary's feelings at some level because we have all felt the same way. Our circumstances may be radically different, but we have all felt the sting of disappointment, especially in our closest relationships. We have all felt the pain of letdown, of being hurt or rejected by the people we had counted on. Even though we might not have thought out our strategy,



we were unconsciously counting on other people to give us the appreciation, the respect, the love, and the acceptance that our hearts craved. But is all of this wrong? Are we bad for feeling so let down, so slighted, so uncared for? Are we wrong in feeling so hopeless? No, it's not wrong to feel hopeless. In fact,

***You can be better off for feeling hopeless.***

It is at the point of hopelessness that we have the opportunity to discover the very purpose for which we have been created. We weren't made to count on people. We weren't made to be satisfied by another human being. No mere mortal could ever pour enough love into us to fill up the deep sinkholes of our soul. No human relationship could ever satisfy our deep needs for security, significance, and satisfaction. We were designed by our Creator to experience Him as the ultimate Lover of our souls.

We were made to know the deep joys of David, the musician-king, who wrote, *Keep me safe, O God, for in You I take refuge. I said to the Lord, 'You are my Lord; apart from You I have no good thing'* (Ps. 16:1,2).

David's experience was very much like that of Asaph, another Psalm writer. He wrote of his deep struggle with discouragement and hopelessness by saying, *As, for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold* (73:2). In other words, he now recognized that he had almost made a terrible mistake as he bitterly and resentfully reflected on the pains and injustices of life. One day this man went into the house of the Lord and saw things in a new light. Suddenly he saw more than the present. He could see "forever."



Temporary pains and injustices looked altogether different as he said:

*When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before You. Yet I am always with You; You hold me by my right hand. You guide me with Your counsel, and afterward You will take me into glory. Whom have I in heaven but You? And earth has nothing I desire besides You. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion*

*forever* (Ps. 73:21-26).

Think again about my friend Mary. The frightening fact is, part of Mary's perception of reality was true: There was no human being alive who could come through for her and love her with the perfect love her soul was crying out for. Because Mary's focus was only on getting others to love her, her relationship with God did not even enter the picture. As painful as it was for Mary, it was good for her to feel her hopelessness. And as painful as it is for you, it can be good for you to feel your hopelessness because only then will you be in the perfect place to realize that:

***In the Lord you have all the help you need.***

An all-consuming sense of helplessness is commonly felt by suicidal persons. They feel as though they have taken about all they can endure, and they are powerless to change anything or anyone who really matters to them.

Mary felt that way. She felt hopeless and inadequate to cope with even the smallest things in life. Her best efforts had failed to gain for her the loving acceptance that she craved from others. At this time in her life, she was 60 pounds overweight. Her husband found her unattractive and avoided her. But when she lost all of the excess weight 2 years ago, nothing changed in their relationship. He still did not pay any attention to her. So she figured it wasn't worth the bother to look good for him.

At least she felt some kind of relief from her husband's rejection while she was eating. But though the eating seemed to ease her pain, it eventually made things worse. It didn't really help. Now she feels completely helpless.

David, the songwriter-king of Israel, knew the meaning of deep despair. He often felt alone and unloved. However, instead of resorting to suicide, he repeatedly turned to the only Person he knew he could trust. *I cry aloud to the Lord .... When my spirit grows faint within me, it is You who know my way. ... I am in desperate need* (Ps. 142:1,3,6).

***You too can find a reason in the Lord to live.***

Although human relationships are important, every one of them will eventually disappoint you. None of them will satisfy you in the ultimate sense of the word. That's because God has built you for more. And the "more" is a relationship He wants to have with you--a relationship that has no rivals.

Does that mean that all you need is God and God alone? Yes, in the sense that if everything else were stripped away, you would

find that the Lord is all you need. But once you find the Lord to be the Lover of your soul, you will also find a new attitude toward other relationships. In the past, you were probably giving yourself to others for what you could receive in return. The Lord, however, can give you a better way of relating. It takes time and growth. But more and more you will find the Lord enabling you to give of yourself to others as an expression of God's love through you.

At this point some very profound things will happen. As your purpose changes from getting to giving, you will begin to experience the difference that can take place when you begin to live with the Lord rather than without Him. Your purpose can be to love and enjoy Him forever. Your goal will be to please Him, to trust Him, to wait for Him, to hope in Him. That's the reason to live.

We have been looking at steps that can help you, or someone you love, to move from a sense of despair to having a reason to live. Before we conclude, let's take one more look at the factors that underlie despair.

### **WHAT IS THE PERSON TRYING TO DO?**

Everything we do is done for a reason. Even the distorted choices of a suicidal person have a purpose. The two common reasons for suicide are *rescue* and *revenge*. What we need to see, however, is: Taking your own life never does what you want it to.

**Rescuing ourselves** from pain is only natural. Anytime we are in pain, we do all we can to ease the hurt. Yet pain is inevitable. Pain is an unavoidable reality in this fallen world of sin and broken relationships. Therefore, we all want to rescue ourselves from the pain we bear. For the suicidal person, nothing seems to have worked. He mistakenly thinks he is out of options. Problems seem insurmountable. "I'm tired of hurting. I can't take any more. I just want out." Death now seems reasonable, even attractive. No more pain or so we think. But death is not the end. It is only another threshold--the threshold to eternity.

**Rescuing others** from the pain he is causing them may be the reason he's considering suicide. A father who has lost his job says, "My wife and kids are better off without me. I've got enough insurance to provide for them. My wife can remarry and maybe this time she won't get stuck with such a loser." (Note: Most insurance companies have a suicide exception clause in their policies. They do not pay in case of suicide.) An elderly grandmother who is slowly withering away in a rest home rationalizes, "I've lived a full life. My mate is gone. If I take

my life, my children and grandchildren will have the rest of the estate to enjoy. They deserve it." In reality, though, suicide only multiplies the pain and grief of loved ones.

**Revenge** is also a powerful motive for suicide. The individual seeks to retaliate against those who have disappointed him. He has thoughts like: "You can't get away with treating me that way. I'll show you. I'll make you pay!" Suicide is said to be the ultimate personal rejection. "I prefer death to living with you for the rest of my life." "I'll stain you with a shame you'll never wash off."

But suicide for revenge always backfires. It may hurt others, but it doesn't destroy them. It's more destructive to you and brings you face to face with God.

By following the common threads of revenge and rescue, we conclude that the bottom line motivation of suicide is selfishness. There is a selfish preoccupation with me and my world to the exclusion of caring about others.

### **WHAT CAN BE DONE?**

Suicidal individuals have a faulty view of life because of a *misplaced dependence* upon themselves and others. They focus on themselves, believing that, "I can do it alone; I don't need the Lord to make my life work." When that strategy fails, they focus on getting others to come through for them on their terms. They try to manipulate others to get what they want from them. Both of these strategies are destined to fail, and the individuals are left both hopeless and helpless.

**The solution to the despair** that comes from living in a fallen world is to face the reality of our inability to deal with life using our own resources. We need to see ourselves as dependent creatures who must rely on the loving involvement of our creator God to make life work. It is our depravity that gets us into trouble (Jer. 17:9). The only solution to that depravity is the substitutionary death of Christ Jesus on the cross. *Repentance* involves facing the foolishness of our stubborn and selfish determination to make life work on our terms--without God. It also means acknowledging God as the faithful One who enters into our life with the strength and love our hearts yearn for (Ps. 16:2; Rom.





5:8; John 3:16).

**Take His life, not your own.** The solution for the despair of life we all feel (not just the suicidal individual) is a restoration of our dependent relationship with Christ. He said, *I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full* (John 10: 10).

This is not a mere existence, but a life of freedom to enjoy all that God has for us. Christ came to set us free (John 8:32,36). He has also promised to rescue us someday from the pain of this present life (Rev. 21:4). Until that glorious day, however, He has promised to sustain us with His presence in the midst of despair. *Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me* (Ps. 23:4).

## **GETTING FURTHER HELP**

***If you continue to see suicide as a possible way out of your pain:***

Don't try to make it on your own. Immediately ask the Lord for help. Confide in a mature and trusted Christian friend. Contact a pastor, a trained counselor, or a suicide prevention hotline. This is no time to deny the seriousness of your need. With the right choices, your hopelessness can lead to the dawn of a new day. The wrong decisions can make your pain far worse than you ever imagined.

***If you know someone who you think is considering suicide:***

Talk to that person about your concern. You will encourage him or her by your willingness to be open. Talk about getting professional help. Assist in finding a competent counselor (or do it yourself). Don't back away. You may not know what to do, but your gentle concern and continued involvement are strong medicine that can encourage him or her not to give up.

Remember, no one (even a trained counselor) has the power to stop someone from committing suicide if he is determined to do so. But this should not prevent you from talking to a suicidal person for fear that he will take his life because of something you said. Your personal involvement will go a long way toward making someone on the edge of life take a second look. And that second look may be the deciding factor in saving that person's life.

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