



THE ANGUISH OF SUICIDE

PASTORAL ENCOURAGEMENT AND COMFORT
FOR THOSE GRIEVING THE LOSS OF A
LOVED ONE TO SUICIDE

PASTOR LESTER ZIMMERMAN

Pastor Lester Zimmerman—Lester has walked as a pastor with people through various crises for over 40 years. He also served in the mental health field, and presently gives oversight to a network of churches and leaders.

Following are excerpts from a message given by Pastor Lester Zimmerman at a memorial service following a tragic suicide. Our hope is you will find some comfort in this message to help you in your grieving journey. We also pray for the release of hope and encouragement to those struggling with depression or suicidal thoughts.

When we lose a loved one to suicide, we experience a deep pain, the kind you feel you will never recover from. Sometimes it feels like a bad dream, and you hope you will wake up soon. Healing begins with facing the pain and reality, even though it is difficult to talk about. The reality is your loved one chose to end his or her life to end their pain and anguish.

But that leaves you as family and friends with shock, profound loss, numbness, questions, and maybe some anger as you try to make sense of it all. These are all very normal feelings as we grieve.

Strength from God

As friends and family, we support each other in our sorrow. We lean on God and draw from his strength. We desire to deepen our understanding of and compassion for those who struggle with depression and hopeless, anguished thoughts.

I'm reminded of what King David said about his son who died. He said he can't come back to us, but we can go to him. This is our Christian comfort as we grieve the death of a loved one who knew Jesus. We know we will see each other again.

For those who didn't know Jesus as their Lord and Savior, we release them into God's hand. He is just and righteous in all his ways. We never know what conversation our loved one may have had with God or commitment they may have made before ending their life.

To help us deal with some of these feelings of deep grief, I want to draw from the comfort of scripture and raise awareness of the pain of the mental illness that causes people to make these irrational and desperate choices. Understanding mental illness is helpful in healing from the grief of suicide.

God's grace and forgiveness reach out to his children who are battling the pain of mental confusion and irrational actions, such as the taking of one's own life. The choice to end your life by suicide is not an acceptable choice, and it grieves God's heart and our hearts. Taking one's own life is tragic but not an unpardonable sin. I believe God receives his loved one into his arms and heals their broken mind.

We live in a hurting and broken world that is hard to navigate sometimes. In this fallen world, not only do our bodies break, but sometimes our minds break as well.

A person's decision to take their own life is usually not because of a lack of love for God, or their spouse, or family, or close friends. Often they have a steadfast love for the Lord and for their family and friends. Nor was it because they didn't feel loved by us, or that we failed them in some way. Usually, a lot of encouragement and love had been poured into them over the years by family and friends. I encourage you not to let your mind dwell on the "what ifs." In most of these situations it's not because of something we did or didn't do. It is because of a broken mind, resulting in

irrational, hopeless thinking and actions.

Broken Mind

If you have not experienced mental illness, it is difficult to comprehend the sense of darkness and irrational despair that sometimes overwhelms a person. In their dark and distorted thinking, ending their life seems like the only option in that moment, even though it is not. They try to hold on to reality but their mind doesn't connect the dots anymore. Reality becomes confused, and they begin to make choices that are no longer rational.

The normal mind can see solutions and options, but in their thinking they can no longer see a way out. Their world begins to close in on them and there is an inner panic and hopelessness that begins to take over. Like a person who is drowning, they feel fear and desperation.

On the outside they may seem to be in control, but on the inside there is torment and anguish to survive. If they don't let someone into their inner world, they will do something desperate.

Now is not a time to judge but to offer compassion—a time to grieve together and to strive to understand more fully how to walk with those who feel hopeless. I am reminded of what the Apostle Paul said about our human condition here on earth.

Romans 8:22-23—For we know that all creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. And we believers also groan, even though we have the Holy Spirit within us as a foretaste of future glory, for we long for our bodies to be released from sin and suffering. We, too,

wait with eager hope for the day when God will give us our full rights as his adopted children, including the new bodies he has promised us. NLT

2 Corinthians 5:1-2—Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands. Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling. NIV

Not Alone in Our Pain

“Meanwhile we groan.” Some of us groan and struggle more than others, but we all look forward to the day when we leave the pain and struggle of this world behind.

Paul not only talks about how this world groans, but he says that even in our pain the purposes of God are being fulfilled. God sees our pain and walks with us in it. We are never alone. There is always a way through our situation.

I want to pause just a minute to encourage those who are reading this and feeling overwhelmed with life. There is support available. You are not alone, even though you feel desperately alone at times. There is help to get you through these times of desperation and feelings of hopelessness.

Allow people to come around you and help you. I know depressed people sometimes battle with shame and find it hard to confide in people. There is no shame when our bodies aren't working properly. Nor should there be shame when our minds aren't working properly. Depression is very real, and many people battle with it to varying degrees.

Medication is a gift from God, whether it is insulin to balance your blood sugar from diabetes or medication to harmonize a

chemical imbalance in your brain. Please consider using medication if you are struggling. It is not a lack of faith. It is not unspiritual. It is a gift. There is no shame or weakness in using it. It is wisdom and strength.

Matthew Warren's Story

I don't claim to understand the pain of those who struggle with suicidal thoughts, nor the pain of those who have lost a loved one to suicide. So I would like to refer to the thoughts of a couple who did lose a loved one to this kind of tragic death. Pastor Rick and Kay Warren lost their son Matthew to suicide at the age of 27 after a long struggle with mental illness. Matthew had a loving family, and access to mental health care, and still he lost the battle to his anguished thoughts.

Rick Warren said, "Matthew was a young man with a tender heart and tortured mind. If love could have kept my child alive, he'd be alive today, because he was incredibly loved." ¹

"I never questioned my faith in God. I questioned God's plan. There's a big difference. I know God is a good God . . . but not everything that happens in the world is God's will. Everything that happens in the world God allows, he permits, because it couldn't happen without his permission. But we live in a world where there are free choices, so if I choose to do wrong, I can't blame God for that. So God isn't to blame for my son's death. My son took his own life. It was his choice." ¹

Kay shared, "To those that are thinking of suicide—don't give up—there is a purpose even in our pain. It's so

important that people know, no matter how desperate their despair, there is hope, and not to give up." ¹

God can use us in the midst of our struggle with mental or physical pain. Rick said, "In God's garden of grace, even a broken tree bears fruit." ¹

Living in this Moment

His wife Kay referenced a quote from Eric Liddell, who was the Olympic gold-medal runner, who said, "Circumstances may appear to wreck our lives and God's plans. But God is not helpless among the ruins. Our broken lives are not lost or useless. God's love is still working. He comes in and takes the calamity and uses it victoriously, working out his wonderful plan of love." ²

She added, "Right now all I can taste is bitter tears . . . but I know that Matthew is OK. He's truly OK. He is not asleep; he has not joined the cosmos; he's not part of the force; he has not ceased to exist. He went straight into the arms of his savior Jesus Christ when his body hit the ground on earth; he was in the presence of God." ²

"And in the perfection of heaven, his broken mind was healed. And I'm so grateful for that. And I look forward; I wait for the day when I'll finally see for myself." ²

So where does all this leave us? Where do we go from here? We move on, cherishing the good memories and good things our loved one has blessed our lives with. We find healing by continuing to talk about them and the ways our lives have been blessed and enriched by them. Finally, as a community, we walk with those who grieve, and we give

them the support, time, patience, and safe place they need to fully grieve.

One Year After Matthew's Death

A year after her son's death, Kay Warren shared the following words to help those of us trying to serve friends and family in deep grief. "I have been shocked by some subtle and not-so-subtle comments indicating that perhaps I should be ready to "move on." Here's my plea: "Please don't ever tell someone to be grateful for what they have left until they've had a chance to mourn what they've lost. It will take longer than you think is reasonable, rational, or even right. But that's OK." ³

"True friends love at all times, and brothers and sisters are born to help in time of need. The truest friends and 'helpers' are those who wait for the griever to emerge from the darkness that swallowed them alive without growing afraid, anxious, or impatient. They don't pressure their friend to be the old familiar person they're used to; they're willing to accept that things are different, embrace the now-scarred one they love, and are confident that their compassionate, non-demanding presence is the surest expression of God's mercy to their suffering friend. They're OK with messy and slow and few answers . . . and they never say 'Move on'." ³

"You're better off keeping your words to some very simple phrases: 'I'm so sorry for your loss.' Or 'I'm praying for you and your family.' We're so quick to say, 'Oh, I know how you feel,' and we usually add the words exactly: 'I know exactly how you feel.' I want to say, 'No. Excuse me. You do not.' The best we can do is to say, 'My heart breaks for you. I have experienced grief, and my heart aches for you.' And I

have to tell you – the old Rick and Kay are gone. They're never coming back. We will never be the same again. There is a new 'normal.' April 5, 2013 has permanently marked us. It will remain the grid we pass everything across for an indeterminate amount of time . . . maybe forever.”³

God Will Walk With You

God is the great redeemer, and he will redeem this death for his purposes. He will bring good out of it in due time. My prayer is that you will know the comfort and presence of God in a very real way in the days ahead.

God will walk with you and your children in a very close and personal way. He is a father to the fatherless and husband to those without a husband.

And to the extended family and friends—Jesus, your shepherd, will restore your soul. He will heal the pain. He will help you in the days ahead.

I have added some scriptures at the end of this booklet to comfort and encourage your heart. These are God's promises and thoughts toward you at this difficult time.

Surrendering to Jesus

Death forces all of us to face the reality of our own destiny. Someday we will all die and stand before our creator. If you have never surrendered your life to Jesus and asked him to forgive you of your sins, I pray that you will do so before it is too late. None of us knows when our last day on this earth will be.

Sometimes we try to manage our lives in our own strength, but God has so much more for us. He promises to give us his strength if we surrender our lives to his control.

Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God. ^{Jn 1:2}

If you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved . . . for, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." ^{Rom 10:9,13}

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. ^{Jn 1:9}

If you would like to surrender your life to Jesus and have him forgive you of your sins and give you eternal life, you can pray this prayer. He will honor the prayer of a repentant heart and give you new life.

Lord Jesus, I admit that I am a sinner. Please forgive my sins and give me your gift of eternal life. I believe you died on the cross and rose from the dead for my sins. Come into my life and be my Savior and Lord. I surrender my whole life to your control. Thank you for forgiving me. Amen.

Comforting Scriptures to Encourage Your Heart

John 14:27 Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid. NIV

1 Peter 5:7 Pour out all your worries and stress upon him and leave them there, for he always tenderly cares for you.
TPT

Psalms 34:17-19 The LORD hears his people when they call to him for help. He rescues them from all their troubles. The Lord is close to the brokenhearted; he rescues those whose spirits are crushed. The righteous person faces many troubles, but the Lord comes to the rescue each time. NLT

Psalms 46:1 God is our refuge and strength, always ready to help in times of trouble. NLT

Isaiah 41:10 Don't be afraid, for I am with you. Don't be discouraged, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you. I will hold you up with my victorious right hand.
NLT

Psalms 4:1 Answer me when I call to you, my righteous God. Give me relief from my distress; have mercy on me and hear my prayer. NIV

Psalms 62:8 Trust in him at all times, you people; pour out your hearts to him, for God is our refuge. NIV

Psalms 18:1-2 I love you, LORD; you are my strength. The LORD is my rock, my fortress, and my savior; my God is my rock, in whom I find protection. He is my shield, the power that saves me, and my place of safety. NLT

Psalms 73:25-26 Whom have I in heaven but you? I desire you more than anything on earth. My health may fail, and my spirit may grow weak, but God remains the strength of my heart; he is mine forever. NLT

Nahum 1:7 The LORD is good, a strong refuge when trouble comes. He is close to those who trust in him. NLT

Lamentations 3:21-26 Yet I still dare to hope when I remember this: The faithful love of the LORD never ends! His mercies never cease. Great is his faithfulness; his mercies begin afresh each morning. I say to myself, “The LORD is my inheritance; therefore, I will hope in him!” The LORD is good to those who depend on him, to those who search for him. So it is good to wait quietly for salvation from the LORD. NLT

Isaiah 41:10 Don’t be afraid, for I am with you. Don’t be discouraged, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you. I will hold you up with my victorious right hand. NLT

Deuteronomy 31:8 The LORD himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged.” NIV

Romans 8:38-39 And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God’s love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God’s love. No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord. NLT

John 14:1-6 Don’t let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, and trust also in me. There is more than enough room in my Father’s home. If this were not so, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you? When everything

is ready, I will come and get you, so that you will always be with me where I am. And you know the way to where I am going. “No, we don’t know, Lord,” Thomas said. “We have no idea where you are going, so how can we know the way?” Jesus told him, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me. NLT

Psalm 23

The LORD is my shepherd;

I have all that I need.

He lets me rest in green meadows;

he leads me beside peaceful streams.

He renews my strength.

He guides me along right paths,

bringing honor to his name.

Even when I walk

through the darkest valley,

I will not be afraid,

for you are close beside me.

Your rod and your staff

protect and comfort me.

You prepare a feast for me

in the presence of my enemies.

You honor me by anointing my head with oil.

My cup overflows with blessings.

Surely your goodness and unfailing love will pursue me

all the days of my life,

and I will live in the house of the LORD

forever. NLT

FOOTNOTES

1 Piers Morgan, *Interview on CNN (Sept 17, 2013)*

2 Kay Warren, *at Saddleback Church (Nov 23, 2013)*

3 Kay Warren, *Facebook post (March 13, 2014)*

COMPANION BOOKLET

When Living Feels Hopeless

A Pastoral and Clinical Response for those Struggling with Suicide—by Lester Zimmerman, Benjamin Dodd, and Candace Gudgeon

For more copies of **The Anguish of Suicide** or **When Living Feels Hopeless** to read or to share with others who are walking through difficult times, write or email:

Petra Church
565 Airport Road
New Holland, PA 17557
info@petra.church



565 Airport Road, New Holland, PA 17557
www.petra.church | 717.354.5394