

# The Role of the Church in Suicide Prevention

Bruce Rickard

*<sup>25</sup> About mid night Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God and the other prisoners were listening to them. <sup>26</sup> Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everyone's chains came loose. <sup>27</sup> The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. <sup>28</sup> But Paul shouted, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!" Acts 16:25-28 New Living Translation*

Is suicide prevention something the Christian Church should concern itself with? Suicide is a difficult subject for many people whether Christian or non-Christian. It is something they would prefer not to have to think about. It is disturbing. It is confronting. It is unsettling. There is a prevailing attitude in society that if you draw too much attention to suicide the incidence will increase. As a consequence, there is very little public debate, even though there are far more deaths to suicide than road fatalities. (1)

A *universal* approach to suicide prevention aims at educating the whole population as to the causes of suicide and equipping people to identify those at risk. Parents who have lost a son or daughter to suicide will often remark that they were attuned to the risks of binge drinking, recreational drugs, eating disorders, cyber bullying, and speed on the roads but they had little understanding of why a young person might want to end their life. Statistics reveal that suicide is one of the primary causes of death amongst young males. (2)

The purpose of this article is to explore a biblical understanding of suicide prevention. To do this we will look at the account of the Philippian Jailer in Acts 16. What this passage highlights is that suicide is a human tragedy that can occur anywhere, at any time, and that the opportunities for intervention may present themselves suddenly and unexpectedly.

There are a number of factors that protect people from suicide. They are qualities that allow a person to deal with stresses and difficult circumstances in a positive manner. Two of these qualities are *resilience* and *connectedness*. They are particularly important in shielding a person from destructive forces that challenge a commitment to life.

Resilience and connectedness were very much to the fore in the life of the apostle Paul. He had endured a particularly difficult 24 hours having been chided by a demon possessed servant girl, falsely accused of undermining the business

interests of an unscrupulous tourist operator, abused by an impassioned mob, flogged mercilessly with poles, denied due legal process, unjustly sentenced and unceremoniously thrown into a dungeon. Paul was not despondent, nor overcome with despair. He didn't complain or vent his anger. He didn't bemoan his wounds or become disheartened by his circumstance. He began to sing! It wasn't a sad song, a lament. It was a joyous song, a triumphant hymn of praise. God had rescued him from a life of religious striving and had set him free to love and serve without fear and without restraint.

Where did Paul find his resilience? It wasn't in religious observance or in keeping the law. It was in knowing God and His transforming love. On the road to Damascus Paul encountered the living Christ. In that moment of self awareness and self awakening love triumphed. The persecutor became the persecuted. Paul came to an understanding that suffering was central to the surrendered life. It was Jesus who was calling him to share in His suffering and so fulfil the law of love. That's why Paul could sing.

Resilience is strengthened by the knowledge that you are loved. In 1983 the Lord called me to go on a pilgrimage to Iona, a small island off the west coast of Scotland. A pilgrimage is an outward sign of the inner journey toward God. It is a spiritual journey which allows for a deepening of your love and commitment to God. Iona was the place St. Columba chose to plant a community of disciples dedicated to nurturing their commitment to God and taking the Christian message to Scotland and beyond. I was standing on a path adjacent to where it is thought St Columba's cell was located when God spoke a word into my heart. It wasn't an audible word but it was a word I heard with great clarity. "I love you." This wasn't a new revelation. I knew God loved me for it is His love which draws us into relationship. But this was different. I had travelled half way around the world in answer to a call. The words "I love you" resounded in my heart. Knowing you are loved nurtures and empowers, equipping you to manage all of life's challenges.

Paul also understood the importance of connectedness. Following his conversion, Paul immediately experienced the care and concern of his fellow believers, even though some were perplexed by the change in this man who had sought their destruction. It was Ananias who prayed for Paul that his sight might be restored and that he might receive the Holy Spirit. It was the gathering of believers in Antioch of Syria who sanctioned his first missionary journey with Barnabus. And it was the church council at Jerusalem who heard first hand of the miraculous signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles. Connectedness speaks of a shared purpose, interdependence, order and accountability.

Paul wrote to the church at Corinth and used the metaphor of the body of Christ to highlight the uniqueness of every individual but also to underscore our unity. He explained that although our purpose may be different we are one body. We all belong and are integral to the proper functioning of the body. Belongingness

speaks of honour, respect, acknowledgement and acceptance.

The church can foster resilience amongst its people by preaching life affirming messages, by instructing its adherents how to survive tough times, by living open and transparent lives devoid of falsehood and hypocrisy, by affirming the value of each person, by creating a safe place where burdened individuals can talk about their personal struggles, and by offering correction in the context of loving and supportive relationships.

The church fails in its calling when it alienates its own, is indifferent to the needs of individuals, fails to identify and celebrate the gifts of its members, overlooks or is insensitive to hardship or personal tragedy, marginalises or rejects those who are guilty of moral failure or sexual impropriety, and imposes legalistic requirements or expectations on those who are young in the faith.

I read recently that suicide occurs among Christians at essentially the same rate as non-Christians. <sup>(3)</sup> And yet there is also a body of research that suggests religion is a protective factor against suicide. Why this seeming contradiction? Those who argue that religion protects against self annihilation point to such factors as having a measure of commitment to core religious beliefs, <sup>(4)</sup> or holding moral objections to suicide namely "I believe only God has the right to end a life" and "My religious beliefs forbid it", <sup>(5)</sup> or frequent attendance at church services and the social benefits that result from such attendance. <sup>(6)</sup> Whilst these realities nurture and protect they can be overridden by multiple risk factors that render a person vulnerable to self destructive thoughts.

Vulnerability is common to all humanity. It may be the result of unemployment or economic hardship, chronic depression or mental instability, physical impairment or terminal illness, a personality disorder or a learning disability, political oppression or religious persecution, homelessness or destitution, a fractured relationship or a loss of standing.

Vulnerability is about knowing you are not invincible. You can be hurt. You can be disappointed. You can be exposed. Vulnerability understands that the challenges and complexities of life may overwhelm you, may bring you down. You may fail. You may be broken. You may feel terribly alone. Vulnerability recognises that there are factors outside your control, external forces that can negatively impact on your circumstance, and that you delude yourself if you imagine yourself to be bullet proof.

Vulnerable is what you feel when you lose someone you love to suicide. Your world is violently shaken. You lurch from side to side. You fear falling. You fear being buried in a pile of rubble. You fear for your life which has been radically redefined. How will you cope? How will you process your loss? How will you ever be able to find pleasure or enjoyment in anything?

Jesus modelled vulnerability. It characterised his birth, his ministry years, and his death. His birth was anything but normal. His parents had to be content with

a stable and no mid-wife. Throughout his three years of ministry Jesus taught the crowds and healed the sick. When asked where he was staying Jesus replied, "Foxes have dens to live in, and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place even to lay his head." (Matthew 8:20) NLT Jesus was nailed to a cross between two common thieves. He was jeered by the crowds. He cried out to his Father, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" (Matthew 27:46) NLT

Jesus gives us permission to own our vulnerabilities, not hide them away. In fact, Jesus seems to be saying that he wants his church to be a *vulnerable* church. What would a vulnerable church look like? It would be a church that acknowledges its dependence on God in all things. Its vision would be shaped by God. Its ministry would be inspired by God. Its leadership would be ordained by God. Its service would be empowered by God. Its life would reflect the nature of God. Its mission would reveal the heart of God. It would be a place of hope for the despairing, a place of healing for the wounded, a place of comfort for the grieving, and a place of restoration for the broken. It is our vulnerability that draws us to God for He is our hope and healing, our comfort and restoration. It is when we lose sight of God that our vulnerabilities can overwhelm us.

The severe earthquake exposed the Philippian Jailer's vulnerabilities. When he saw the open prison doors he feared the worst. He reasoned that he had failed in his duty and would be held responsible for the prisoners who had escaped. He anticipated the inevitable. He would die for his failure to supervise the prisoners and keep them locked up. He drew his sword and was about to stab himself. Suicide presented itself as the only solution to an impossible situation. Paul's intervention saved his life. Paul's words are pivotal to suicide prevention. "Don't harm yourself. We are all here."

When a person is feeling suicidal there is no greater gift we can offer than the gift of our presence. When a personal crisis assumes life threatening proportions, we don't need the right words, the right answers, the right solutions, though sometimes they are needed in extreme emergencies. True presence or "being with" another person carries with it a silent power. (7) It is an intimate connection that may help carry an emotional burden, still a troubled mind, and begin a healing process.

The reality is suicidal people often feel terribly isolated. They think that no-one could possibly understand what they are experiencing. They are overwhelmed with a sense of hopelessness. There are no answers to the most pressing issues that confront them. They feel personally responsible for their plight and don't want to implicate others. They believe they have the means to draw a line under all the pain and confusion. Shame and regret hold them captive. All resistance is gone. The end awaits.

The Philippian jailer's perception was that there was no-one who could help. He was desperately alone. The only reasonable option was to end his life. Death waited to greet him. The words of the apostle transformed his distorted reality. Not only was the reason for his shame removed he found he wasn't alone. There

was a caring community ready to embrace him, to surround him with love, to nurture him and to speak truth into his life.

It has been found that while some suicides are deliberative and involve careful planning, many appear to have an impulsive component and occur during a short-term crisis. The acute period of heightened risk for suicidal behaviour is often only minutes or hours long. (8) If we accept these findings it becomes apparent that prevention is possible.

Don Ritchie was awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia for his suicide prevention work. He lived across the road from The Gap in Sydney, one of the world's top suicide spots. He officially saved more than 160 potential jumpers and 400 unofficially, by talking to them and bringing them into his home. (9) Like Don Ritchie people in the general community can make a significant contribution to suicide prevention. Caring about other human beings and being responsive to their inner turmoil can make a difference.

The Apostle Paul's intervention qualifies him for the title of 'Gatekeeper'. A Gatekeeper is a term currently used to refer to workers and community members who identify and support people at risk of suicide. The theory underlying principle is the assumption that by developing a strong relationship with an "at risk" person and connecting them with appropriate support will reduce their sense of hopelessness and of being alone in their struggle. The expectation is that by implementing effective intervention the likelihood of suicide is reduced. (10)

It is clear that suicide prevention is a topic that every adult should take time to understand so that they will be able to help themselves or someone in their life to deal with thoughts of suicide. Suicide prevention is an imperative for those committed to God's kingdom, those called to serve in the name of Jesus. Undoubtedly, suicide has become one of the great spiritual battles of our time. (11)

It is the multiplicity of factors that may lead a person to consider suicide that makes it difficult to eliminate and their unwillingness to disclose their pain that complicates our best efforts at prevention. But God's people have a unique role to play in that we alone have the authority to take a stand against the forces of darkness. We alone, church, are called to oppose the 'spirit of suicide', to challenge every evil design and to pray that life might triumph over death. It is estimated that there are a million suicides worldwide every year. In Australia a person takes their life every four hours. It is time the church took seriously its pivotal role in suicide prevention.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (1999) provides this compelling argument for the church to take seriously its God appointed role in suicide prevention.

*Suicide testifies to life's tragic brokenness. We believe that life is God's good and*

*precious gift to us, and yet life for us ourselves and others sometimes appears to be hell, a torment without hope. When we would prefer to ignore, reject, or shy away from those who despair of life, we need to recall what we have heard: God's boundless love in Jesus Christ will leave no one alone and abandoned. We who lean on God's love to live are called to "bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2). Our efforts to prevent suicide grow out of our obligation to protect and promote life, our hope in God amid suffering and adversity, and our love for our troubled neighbor. (12)*

#### References:

- (1) Deaths due to suicide significantly exceed fatalities from motor vehicle accidents and homicides combined. (Suicide and Suicide Prevention in Australia: Breaking the Silence. Lifeline Australia 2010)
- (2) Although suicide of men in the 15 to 24 years age group occurs at a lower rate (13.4 per 100,000) it accounts for close to one quarter of all male deaths in this age bracket.
- (3) Hsu, A: *When suicide strikes in the body of Christ*. Christianity Today, 12 April 2013
- (4) Greening and Stoppelbein (2002) in Nelson,G., Hanna, R., Houri, A. & Klimes-Dougan, B. (2012) Protective functions of religious traditions for suicide risk. University of Minnesota, USA
- (5) Dervic, K., Oquendo, M. A., Grunebaum, M. F., Ellis, S., Burke, A. K. & Mann, J. J. (2004) Religious affiliation and suicide attempt. *Am J Psychiatry* 161:2303-2308
- (6) Pescosolido and Georgianna (1989) ) in Nelson,G., Hanna, R., Houri, A. & Klimes-Dougan, B. (2012) Protective functions of religious traditions for suicide risk. University of Minnesota, USA
- (7) Hall, D (2005) *The Power of Presence*
- (8) Hawton K. Restricting access to methods of suicide. *Crisis*. 2007;28 (S1):4-9.
- (9) Read more at <http://www.environmentalgraffiti.com/news-5-top-suicide-spots#vY4rcg8EIgbcwPPP.99>
- (10) Centrecare Corporate: One Life Gatekeeper Training
- (11) National Indigenous Anglican Bishop Mark MacDonald (Anglican Church of Canada)
- (12) Evangelical Lutheran Church in America 1999