

Dare To Hope

Bruce Rickard

"Yet I still dare to hope when I remember this: The unfailing love of the Lord never ends! By His mercies we have been kept from complete destruction."
*Lamentations 3:21-22 NLT**

On the 26th April 2011 we heard news that had a devastating effect on us, released an ocean of tears and changed our lives forever. Our beautiful thirty year old son Adam had taken his life. I cried out in despair, "Oh Adam! What have you done? Was your pain so great? Could you not see what your death would mean for those closest to you, for those left behind - the intense sorrow and sadness we would have to endure?"

It was like being caught up in a tsunami – a surging mass of water that sweeps all before it. Our world was in turmoil. We desperately searched for something to cling to. It seemed that Adam had found peace, a refuge from the pain that had engulfed him. Our lives had become chaotic, ravaged by conflicting emotions: anger, sorrow, guilt, regret, shame, fear, helplessness, rejection, and disbelief.

How could we possibly recover? Suicide grief has been described by psychologists as 'complicated grief'. It has been compared to that experienced by a holocaust survivor and like many holocaust survivors it can be very difficult to talk about. How can you adequately express the magnitude of the hurt and loss?

"Suicide is almost always a very private act, although the legacy of suicide and its impact on those left behind may be very public and powerful."⁽¹⁾ Suicide is a sudden death, shocking, unexpected, violent. Nothing prepares you for it. You feel the loss deeply, personally. You assume a measure of responsibility. Somehow you missed the warning signs or underestimated the panic and desperation in your loved one. You are left to contemplate the WHY. And it seems that this can become a lifelong pursuit. It has been said that when someone takes their life they create a mystery. It is not wrong to want to understand, to try and fit the pieces together, but no-one can fully explain the suicidal mind.

Hopelessness is an important risk factor in death by suicide. That is not to say that everyone who experiences hopelessness is a candidate for suicide. The reality is that most people find a way through. Edwin Shneidman, author of 'The Suicidal Mind' says, "The common emotion in suicide is hopelessness."⁽²⁾ But what do we mean by hopelessness? One writer defined it as 'a system of

negative beliefs and expectancies concerning oneself and one's future.' It is like being plunged into darkness. Hopelessness is a sense that things will never get better; a feeling of inability or lack of motivation to change the situation; a belief that your emotional pain is permanent or too much to bear; a sense of personal worthlessness; self-hatred or self-loathing; a sense that all meaning has been removed from life. A suicidal person feels deeply despondent, utterly unsalvageable.

There are seven acts of suicide recorded in the Bible. What we find is a simple narrative with little or no commentary on the act itself. Suicide isn't condemned but neither is it condoned. For our purposes, I want us to reflect on the death of King Saul and that of Judas Iscariot who both took their lives. In particular, I want us to look for signs of hopelessness. But before we go there it is necessary to establish what we mean by suicide.

Suicide has been defined as 'self killing'. But if a motor cyclist ignores the wet weather conditions, skids on the slippery surface and is propelled into oncoming traffic resulting in his death we could conclude that the motor cyclist was responsible for his death. But was it a suicide? No! The coroner would record the death 'accidental'. Self killing, therefore, includes death by misadventure or accidental death.

Suicide is any self-injurious act intended to end one's life which results in death. It is defined as 'death by self-inflicted, intentional injury.' There are three necessary elements for a death to be classified a suicide. The action is self-inflicted – there is no-one there to offer assistance; the outcome is death – otherwise it would be deemed an uncompleted suicide; and the intention is clearly to end one's life. Intention is particularly difficult to establish. When a car with a single occupant veers off the road and slams into a tree and there is no evidence of breaking how can we be sure that the driver didn't intend to end their life?

So let us return to our two biblical characters. Saul was chosen by God to be the first king of Israel. He looked like royalty – tall, handsome, dignified. He was also touched in a special way by God's spirit and power. Under his leadership, the Hebrews succeeded in establishing a strong, unified resistance to the Philistines and other hostile neighbours. Saul began well but lost his way. He was troubled - emotionally, mentally and spiritually. He was tormented by an evil spirit. It was David's anointed playing that brought him some peace.

It shouldn't come as a surprise that God's chosen can come under spiritual attack. It is often described in terms of 'spiritual oppression'. M. Scott Peck, American psychiatrist and bestselling author, describes spiritual oppression as "a state where the demonic has obtained a foothold within the person but not yet a presence of sufficient strength to encase the victim's soul totally."⁽³⁾ Spiritual oppression refers to demonic activity in the life of the believer. It relates to spiritual entities that oppose us and work to bring us down. These spiritual entities belittle, harass, and undermine our efforts to live godly lives. They

discourage, question our theology, challenge our motives, and render us ineffectual. They cause us to be unsettled and anxious, doubting that we can hear God and fearful that we will fall from His grace. They deflate our faith, neutralise our effectiveness, and compromise our witness. The apostle Paul, in his final word to the church at Ephesus, speaks of a war. *"For we are not fighting against flesh and blood enemies, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against mighty powers in this dark world, and against evil spirits in the heavenly places."* (Ephesians 6:12) NLT*

Saul ultimately succumbed to public opinion. He allowed the seed of jealousy to take root in his life. It is a sober reminder to each one of us to examine ourselves to see if any wickedness resides in us. Saul's jealousy left unchecked ultimately led to violent outbursts. He attempted to kill David his successor and son-in-law.

The Philistines were a constant threat to the safety and security of God's people. Saul's final act was on the slopes of Mt Gilboa where his armies were routed and three of his sons slain including Jonathon. Wounded and despondent, stripped of all hope, Saul asked his armour bearer to end his life but such was his devotion to his master and king he refused. The Bible account reads, *"So Saul took his own sword and fell on it. When his armour bearer realised that Saul was dead, he fell on his own sword and died beside the king."* (1 Samuel 31:4, 5) NLT*

Judas Iscariot was one of the Twelve, chosen by the Lord. We don't know the nature of the exchange that saw Judas commit to a new life and a new relationship. We can imagine that Jesus looked into his eyes and love summoned this man to put everything aside and follow the teacher, the anointed one. We tend to overlook the fact that Judas was sent out to bear witness to the truth and returned, like the other disciples, declaring that even the evil spirits were subject to them. Judas witnessed the healings, participated in the miracles, and heard the authoritative words of life. We know that he was entrusted with looking after the disciple's funds and that he was opposed to extravagance. But he succumbed to temptation and used the money for his own purposes as the need arose. Unfaithfulness is service stripped of honesty and integrity. Unfaithfulness leaves the door ajar for the devil to gain a foothold in our lives. The apostle Paul wrote to the early church, *"Don't give the devil a chance."* (Ephesians 4:27)

At the last Supper Jesus was aware of all that was going on. He knew what was in the heart of Judas and that he had been turned. We don't know what motivated Judas to sell out to the religious leaders but we do know the devil was involved and was using him to further his plans. The betrayal took place at night, away from public view. It was an act of treachery which accelerated the self destruction of this man who had become blind to the truth. When Judas heard that Jesus was condemned to die his hopes were shattered. Full of remorse he tried to return the bribe to the religious leaders. The Bible record says that *"Judas acknowledged his sin, the betrayal of an innocent man. Then he*

threw the money onto the floor of the Temple and went out and hanged himself." (Matthew 27: 4, 5) NLT*

The Christian Church warned against suicide for many centuries. St Augustine lived in the 4th Century in what was a pagan world. Martyrdom was common amongst the Christian population. There were also a growing number of followers who were choosing suicide as a preferred means of death. They were driven by a desire to escape the current misery and suffering. Their hope was firmly grounded in the afterlife at the expense of this life. Augustine was the first Christian writer to condemn suicide explicitly. He argues that the sixth commandment, "Thou shalt not kill," prohibits suicide. In his writing, *The City of God*, Augustine says, "No man ought to inflict upon himself voluntary death, for this is to escape the ills of the time by plunging into those of eternity."⁽⁴⁾

In the 13th century, Thomas Aquinas strengthened the Church's official position against suicide. Aquinas completed a comprehensive and systematic review of Christian theology. In this work he vilified suicide as an act against God and denounced suicide as a sin for which one could not repent.

But is suicide the unpardonable sin? Before we can address this difficult question it is necessary to explore what drives a person to take their life. The Centres for Disease Control and Prevention remind us that "Suicide is never the result of a single factor or event, but rather results from a complex interaction of many factors and usually involves a history of psychosocial problems."⁽⁵⁾ We have previously identified hopelessness as an important risk factor. But there are other characteristics present in people who contemplate suicide. These include but are not limited to a sense of being cut off from others (social disconnection); mental illness; low self esteem; a fear of failure; a recent meaningful loss; childhood trauma; communication problems; humiliation, embarrassment, shame; history of alcohol and drug abuse; impulsive or aggressive tendencies; and an unwillingness to seek help. Obviously, someone who is suicidal won't exhibit all these symptoms and not everyone who has these symptoms will be suicidal. However, if the identifiable risk factors are not addressed mental distress may result.

It was Edwin Shneidman, pioneer in the study, prevention and intervention of suicide and suicidal behaviour, who coined the term *psychache*. It refers to the anguish, hurt and misery that a person experiences in their mind. When the turmoil is not appropriately addressed, psychache may build until it becomes intolerable. At these heightened levels, some people begin to have the idea of death as the only way to end their pain. As Shneidman says, "Suicide happens when the psychache is deemed unbearable and death is actively sought to stop the unceasing flow of painful consciousness. Suicide is a tragic drama in the mind."⁽⁶⁾ Author Joseph Conrad says, "Suicide, I suspect, is very often the outcome of mere mental weariness – not an act of savage energy but the final symptom of complete collapse."⁽⁷⁾

Those who argue that suicide is the unpardonable sin suggest that there is no opportunity for the person to repent of their action. They have chosen death over life and have rejected God's available grace. Albert Hsu, an editor at InterVarsity Press and a survivor of suicide (he lost his father to suicide) says, "Christian salvation is not dependent on whether a person was able to 'wipe the slate clean' at the moment of death, but rather whether the person was walking in relationship with God in life."⁽⁸⁾

Our son Adam had a burden for lost souls. He understood the seriousness of being out of relationship with your Heavenly Father. He preached on street corners and in shopping malls. He even preached outside Southern Cross Railway Station to bustling crowds intent on other business. His preaching was earnest, focussing on the fallenness of mankind. He understood that without a sin consciousness there is no need of a Saviour. His preaching had all the earmarks of revivalist preaching. But in the latter months Adam became something of a 'lone ranger'. God never intends that our service for Him and His kingdom be conducted in isolation. We need the support and encouragement of others. We need to be accountable. The church is a living organism made up of many parts and each part is inter-related to the other. The church is a body with many members. The church is a community where all people are to be loved, affirmed and nurtured in the wisdom of God. The church is a place of belonging, a family where connectedness is a given. Adam found himself socially disconnected, cut off from those who could have been there for him in his hour of crisis.

Our hope is firmly grounded in God's word. Our confidence rests in what God has revealed about Himself and His relationship to His children. It is our belief that the Bible teaches God can and does forgive his children who choose to take their life. That is not to say that suicide isn't a tragic and unnecessary event.

There are two pillars of truth that provide genuine cause for hope. The first is "God's grace is without prejudice." Nowhere in the Bible does God compartmentalise sin and reserve grace only for those who commit 'acceptable' sins. ⁽⁹⁾ The sacrificial death of Jesus is sufficient for all our sins – past, present, and future.

"For God presented Jesus as the sacrifice for sin. People are made right with God when they believe that Jesus sacrificed his life, shedding his blood. This sacrifice shows that God was being fair when he held back and did not punish those who sinned in times past." (Romans 3:25) NLT*

Billy Graham, world renowned evangelist, says "Suicide is always a tragedy – but in itself it is not the unpardonable sin. The only sin God cannot pardon is the sin of rejecting Him."⁽¹⁰⁾

Baker and Nestor, authors of *Depression: Finding Hope and Meaning in Life's Darkest Shadow* suggest, "The only sin that truly keeps one from God's presence

is the sin of unbelief – of not trusting the work of Christ personally. If salvation depended upon confessing every sin committed as a believer, no one would qualify! The unfortunate and sad ending of an individual's life of his own hand does not nullify the effect of the grace of God in his life."⁽¹¹⁾

The second pillar of truth is "God's love is without limits." His love is boundless, immeasurable and unconditional. It is pure, indestructible and eternal. He loves each one individually and knows everything there is to know about a person. His love is unique, addressing our specific needs. There is no way that a person can escape God's love even if their confusion and pain causes them to tragically end their life.

"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." (Romans 8:38) NLT*

Our unshakable belief in a God whose grace is without prejudice and whose love is without limits allows us to DARE TO HOPE.

Notes:

(1) Living is For Everyone (LIFE) Framework (2007) Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing.

(2) Edwin Shneidman, (1996) The Suicidal Mind. New York: Oxford University Press

(3) M. Scott Peck, (2005) Glimpses of the Devil. Free Press: a division of Simon & Schuster

(4) Saint Augustine (1998) The City Of God. Cambridge University Press

(5) The Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, 1600 Clifton rd, Atlanta, GA 30333, United States

(6) Edwin Shneidman, Op Cit.

(7) Quoted by Kay Redfield Jamieson, (2000) Night Falls Fast. Vintage

(8) Albert Hsu, (2002) Grieving a Suicide. InterVarsity Press

(9) Charles F Stanley, (2008) Handbook for Christian Living. Thomas Nelson

(10) Billy Graham's My Answer, Billy Graham Evangelistic Association

(11) Don Baker & Emery Nester, (1987) Depression: Finding Hope and Meaning in Life's Darkest Shadow. Doubleday Religious Publishing Group

* Holy Bible. New Living Translation copyright© 1996, 2004, 2007 by Tyndale House Foundation.