

THE OTHER SIDE OF Suicide

BY DR. EDWARD MOODY

I MOVED THROUGH THE HOSPITAL AS QUICKLY AS I COULD WITHOUT RUNNING. I COULD SEE A DISTRAUGHT MAN SPEAKING TO THE RECEPTIONIST. HE KEPT REPEATING THE NAME OF A PERSON AND SAYING HE KNEW HE WAS AT THE HOSPITAL. AS I WALKED UP THE RECEPTIONIST SAID, "SIR, WE ONLY HAVE PATIENTS LISTED IN OUR DATABASE." I TAPPED THE MAN ON THE SHOULDER AND OFFERED TO TAKE HIM TO THE FAMILY OF THE MAN HE WAS LOOKING FOR. AS THE RECEPTIONIST'S WORDS BEGAN TO SINK IN HE REALIZED HIS FRIEND HAD DIED.

"This was an accident, right?"

"No, he did this to himself," I said.

In that moment I witnessed the uniqueness of death by suicide. His face told me an accident, even a homicide would have been more bearable than this.

Every day, 121 people in the United States take their lives. I hope you never have to deal with the other side of suicide but chances are that you or someone you know will at some point. Hold on to this article for that day.

Years ago I worked as a staff psychologist at a correctional institute where on average I dealt with a suicidal person every day. We constantly trained staff and worked hard to prevent suicide. Though I never had anyone complete a suicide it was a constant worry of mine. Unfortunately, as a pastor, I have become too familiar with the other side of suicide. I have written about suicide prevention but in this article I will focus on some things to consider after a person has taken his or her own life.

IT'S OKAY TO BE ANGRY

No one wants to admit it but there is often anger after a suicide. There is anger at the person who has committed suicide, and even anger at God. I received a call late one evening from a family I pastored about a young man who had taken his life. I remember thinking, *Really? How did we lose a young man like this who had never harmed anyone?* This wonderful man would have likely done much good in his life.

There was anger toward the young man. What was he thinking? Did he not know the harm he would be inflicting upon his parents, siblings, friends, and the person who found him? His action led to pain like no other.

It is easy to be angry and confused over it all. To deal with this it is helpful to look at biblical examples like Job. Read his words and watch how he struggled with the pain, hurt, and unfairness of his situation. He did not try to bury his anger and neither should we. Acknowledge the anger you experience and pray through it.

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GIVE SOME GRACE

As you process what has happened it may become clear that the person did not realize the pain he or she would cause. Many years ago I did crisis counseling after the homicide of a young man. I was talking to another young man, much like the one who had been killed, and he said, "You know, Jerry (not his real name) would have never believed how much people cared about him and how sad they would be about his death." It is not a direct comparison but I suspect that most people who take their lives don't understand fully the harm they are inflicting on others. I encourage you to give them some grace just like you would if they had died from texting while driving or driving too fast through a curve. Most of us have done something risky without fully considering the impact it would have on those we care about.

A young man I had once tried to help later engaged in a serious suicide attempt. In fact, were it not for the wise and quick thinking of the staff at the facility and the heroic actions of medical personnel he would not have survived. I met with him after the event and he apparently perceived my anger over what he had done. Many of those who addressed his needs probably did not sleep for a week. He finally said, "You don't understand . . . I didn't see any way out." This man was pleased and relieved he survived but when he attempted suicide he was at a point where he felt like he had no other choice. Incidentally, he still felt that way. Though he was not suicidal at that moment, his decision to harm himself made sense to him. It seemed to him like the only way to stop the pain. Some people experience pain we could never comprehend.

THIS IS NOT OKAY

At the same time, it is important to convey to everyone that suicide is not okay. Too often, within about six months of a suicide, another person within that circle will attempt suicide. Talk about the pain the event has caused and stress that others should not put their loved ones through this.

IT'S NOT YOUR FAULT

There is often guilt after a suicide. We tend to do a lot of "If I would have done this," which is a way of torturing yourself. This is not your fault. One of the gentlemen I worked with had attempted suicide several times. At some point he had a kind of breakthrough and committed to living. He agreed to give me all of the items he had been hiding in his cell to use to kill himself. He was in an isolation cell, which was the most secure place in the facility. But as he stepped around

the cell, he removed a piece of plastic from one place, an item from another place, and I began to realize how easy it would have been for him to kill himself. As I held all of this contraband I was relieved. Then he said, "You realize I don't need that to kill myself." He went on to describe how he could stand on top of the toilet and fall, striking his head. I could tell he had thought it through. Then he said, "It's my choice." At that time this bothered me. But in the years that have followed I have been comforted by his words. It really is their choice. Remember, it's not your fault.

TALK TO SOMEONE

I pray that God will give you someone with whom you can talk. Look for people who are more concerned about you and your well-being than consumed about how the person you cared about has died. Find someone who will listen to you, who will help carry this burden (Galatians 6:2). Once you find someone, embrace and cherish this person. People like this are gifts from God.

FOCUS ON THE PERSON'S LIFE, NOT ON DEATH

I encourage you to focus on the life of the one you cared about rather than how he or she died. Consider Samson. The writer of Hebrews briefly mentioned Samson but made no mention of the way he died. The passage alludes to his heroic life (Hebrews 11:32-34). Remember the life of the one you loved.



TAKE REFUGE IN THE LORD

Look to God. I encourage you to focus on passages like Psalm 46. Your world has turned upside down. You may have serious doubts about the person who has done this and wonder if you really knew him or her. You may have doubts about God. Keep going back to the Word. Become one with passages like Romans 8. I do not think it is an

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accident that Romans 8:28 is often misquoted by others in situations like the one in which you find yourself. What happened to you is not good, but you can be assured God will work through it and do good for you. Sometimes well-meaning people may hurt you with the Scripture. We know that Satan misquotes Scripture and even uses godly people for his purpose. He even twisted passages when he tempted Jesus (Matthew 4). Keep coming back to the Scripture and especially Romans 8:31-39. Nothing can separate a person from God (not even depression, confusion, or doubt). And when you do not know what to pray, it is the Holy Spirit who intercedes for you (Romans 8:26). You may not feel like it but God is helping you and He knows what He is doing. I think one of the saddest passages in the Bible is where the family of Samson had to go and retrieve his body for burial after his self-inflicted death (Judges 16:31). Take refuge in the fact that the same God who helped Samson's family over 3000 years ago is helping you today. ☺