

On Suicide

The incidence of depression, anxiety, and suicide has skyrocketed as the isolation and life-disruption from Covid-19 has ravaged our world. I wrote this post in April 2013, but it's even more salient today.

Over the weekend, Rick Warren (pastor of Saddleback Church in California, author of *The Purpose Driven Life*) and his wife Kay revealed that their son Matthew had taken his life after a lifelong struggle with mental illness. In an email to his church, Pastor Warren wrote, “[O]nly those closest knew that he struggled from birth with mental illness, dark holes of depression, and even suicidal thoughts. In spite of America’s best doctors, meds, counselors, and prayers for healing, the torture of mental illness never subsided.”

Many years ago, I was privileged to take a three-year lay counseling class from a wise and experienced man who taught us that those who commit suicide don’t really want to die; they just want the pain to end. Deep depression feels like being locked in a dark dungeon with no way out. The pain can become intolerably intense; one friend likened it to being forced to hold a large cauldron of boiling liquid with no hot pads. Those of us who have been spared from deep depression cannot really imagine how dark and how painful it is.

Psalm 139:16 says, “All the days ordained for me were written in Your book before one of them came to be.” That means that before God even creates us, He knows the day of our death. That also means that those who commit suicide are dying on their ordained last day. Most of the time, though, God intervenes in people’s plans to end their lives, each story different and drenched in grace.

When one teenage girl learned she was pregnant, she planned to drive one of her family’s cars into an embankment at the end

of the week-but her parents sold that car before she could carry out her plan, and she decided she couldn't wreck the one remaining vehicle. Today, she is so glad she gave birth to her baby girl, who brought immeasurable joy to her adoptive parents, and enjoys her life of service to God which includes her own family.

Another friend lay in bed one night planning to end her life by walking out in front of an 18-wheeler on the nearby interstate. As she thought about making her way in her nightgown across the empty field that lay between her house and the highway, she suddenly thought, "I can't walk across that field in my bare feet!" . . . and turned over and went back to sleep.

When our son was suicidally depressed in high school, his friend came to us and told us of his plan to hurt himself a few days later. He was not pleased that his friend had "betrayed" him, but we were so grateful-and it enabled us to get him some badly-needed help.

There are so many stories of God's intervention that when we do hear of someone taking their own life, I do believe it means God allowed it because it was their ordained day. This doesn't diminish the pain for the survivors, though.

My dear friend Caren Austen, responding to the news of Matthew Warren's suicide, wrote an essay revealing her own struggles with mental illness and suicidal depression so that people would know what it's like. With her permission, I gratefully share these excerpts:

"I am not weak, lacking in faith, demon-possessed or oppressed or anything else but suffering from faulty brain chemistry.

"The disorder affects my daily life: my ability to work, interact with other people, activities of daily living to the point of sometimes being unable to get out of bed or

leave my house. I hate it. I hate that God has chosen this path for my growth and sanctification. Depression is my nearly constant companion. I rarely get a break. I wake up with it. I work with it. I go to sleep with it, knowing that tomorrow I'll wake up and live it all over again.

"There are so many of us who suffer silently, because it is not acceptable to discuss mental illness. Cancer is OK. People have sympathy and understanding for that. Cystic Fibrosis, diabetes, MS and the multitude of other terrible diseases and disorders are acceptable. Mental illness is considered taboo. The stigma attached to it prevents people from getting the help they need, from picking up the phone, from asking for prayer.

"Many, many people, especially Christians, negatively judge people with mental illness and especially those who have made the awful decision to take their own lives. A common statement is: 'It's the ultimate selfish act.' I'd ask you to consider what agony any individual must be enduring to fight every natural instinct for survival to choose instead to die. To be feeling psychic pain so incredible that the very thought of even one more moment is unendurable. I have, in the past, been completely and thoroughly convinced that if I loved my family, especially my children, as I said I did, I would remove the evil (me) from their lives, so I would no longer influence them for evil.

"These are the kinds of thoughts that people who choose suicide experience. They are not to be judged harshly. They are to be seen with compassion. Yes, it is an unspeakable tragedy that leaves those left behind with the worst kind of pain. A pain that I can't even imagine as they believe that the one who died didn't love them enough to fight. I know those are the thoughts, the feelings of those left behind, but they are not the actual reasons suicide was chosen. In fact, just the opposite is likely true. The one who chooses suicide often does it out of love for those they care most

about, as strange as that may seem.”

Please, please pray for the Warren family and for all those teetering on the edge of suicide. God knows who they are. It may even be someone you know and love.

This blog post originally appeared at
blogs.bible.org/on_suicide/.

“What Do You Think of ‘The Purpose Driven Life’ by Rick Warren?”

None of us here at Probe have any cautions or reservations about it.

Personally, I think it has become so popular because Rick Warren has taken “Basic Christian Living” principles and put them all in one place, in a highly accessible format. One of the best things about the book is its first sentence: “It’s not about you.” So his starting point is that the Christian life, the purpose-driven life, is about giving glory to God. It’s not about personal fulfillment or self-actualization—it’s all about God. That puts everything else into proper perspective.

The fact that this book appeals to both believers and unbelievers is exciting to me, because we are all hungry for truth and this book has it. It is steeped through and through with Scripture, and it’s well written.

“What Do You Think of Willow Creek?”

What do you think of the Willow Creek church model that so many churches are following?

Thank you for your thoughtful question. It is a common question today in light of the success that Willow Creek has enjoyed in the Chicago area and the emulation of that model around the world. The same concerns have arisen around Rick Warren’s Saddleback Church in California. (He is also the author of the best-seller *The Purpose Driven Life*.) Before I go much further in my response to your question I should let you know that I am an elder in a church that, in general, looks favorably on what these churches are attempting to do, although I have reservations about some of the particulars in their implementation. With that said, I should add that I believe that it is unwise to ever try to replicate what another church is doing in a wholesale manner. This indicates a dependency on technique over trust in God’s Spirit to build His church in a given location.

As is usually the case, this issue has to do with deeper concerns than just the music that is heard on Sunday or the preaching style of the pastor. The question at the heart of the issue is whether or not God has ordained both the *forms* of worship, teaching, and church structure, or only the *functions* of the New Testament church. I tend to think that scripture focuses on the functions of the church and that we are free to establish culturally appropriate forms to accomplish them with. As we like to say at our church, we are not a seeker

church, a Willow Creek church, a charismatic church, or a Bible church. We are a church that incarnates Christ in the town of McKinney, TX. Our goal is to help people follow Christ, and we will use music, teaching styles and programs that accomplish that task. Our teaching will be biblical and challenging, touching both the hearts and minds of our congregation. We desire to use the best music, both old and new, in genres that speak to the people walking through our doors.

The outcome over the last seven years has been encouraging. People are trusting in Christ and being baptized, they are growing in knowledge and grace, they are giving sacrificially and becoming involved in missions, and they are reaching out to the community in significant ways. Our numerical growth has been significant, but the spiritual growth of individuals is what has encouraged me the most.

If you are interested in reading more about the relationship between form and function within the New Testament church, let me recommend a book that might be helpful: *Sharpening The Focus Of The Church* by Gene Getz (Victor Books, 1984).

Sincerely,

Don Closson
Probe Ministries