



# Permission TO GRIEVE FOR THE SUICIDE

by Rev. Peter Preus

Grief counselors speak of five stages of grieving. There is shock or denial followed by anger or guilt. There is bargaining. You evaluate why the death occurred and you try to delay grief's effects. There is depression. You come to terms with death and sadness sets in. And finally, there is acceptance. As you cannot render death null and void, you accept your loss. But what if acceptance is impossible since the latest family death is *not* acceptable? How your loved one died crossed the line of decency. It's neither peaceful nor natural. She killed herself! He died by his own hand!

If you are grieving for a suicide, your grieving may have stalled. Other means of death generate shock and intense sorrow. But death by suicide cuts deeper. People aren't supposed to die like this. Suicide is an evil and forbidden death, leaving an image you cannot erase from your mind. For this reason, you may end up grieving for decades rather than for years. You don't want to talk about it and others don't want to hear about it. And if they did, suicide doesn't make any sense. You can explain what happened in the most honest and caring manner. But it won't stop the finger-pointing and psycho-analyzing. In the end, you feel you haven't permission to grieve, not like *other* believers. And so, you don't. You fail to work through your grief like the rest of the Christian community.

But what does it mean to grieve as a Christian? How we grieve as God's people is different than how the world grieves. Worldly

grieving consists of clearing a series of hurdles. After the shock and anger and delaying tactics run their course, presumably one can move on. But the world grieves as those who have no hope (1 THESS. 4:13). Even if one prevails over the pain and trauma of grief, there's no possibility of a joyful future. Christian grieving, alternatively, consists of just two elements: sorrow and joy. Jesus declares, "So also you have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you" (JOHN 16:22). In Christ's kingdom, this sorrow and joy may occur simultaneously. At the very moment you mourn your loss you rejoice in salvation's gains. Despite the barrage of tears you observe around you, your loved one is with Jesus!

## SUICIDE'S STIGMA

But where is this joy today? If you are grieving for a Christian suicide, there exist several barriers to your grieving. And unless you confront and contain these barriers, your grieving will be hampered. One very prominent obstacle is suicide's stigma. Grieving typically involves you sharing your memories. It's why you grieve. You recall your life together and it's immediately evident that you will miss your loved one. When you grieve for a suicide, however, you don't talk about your reason for grieving. Recent memories, presumably, will reveal that your loved one was weak or troubled. Or they will give others cause to judge you. "Surely, you're the reason this person

was so troubled” is the thinking. At best, you failed to observe what was upsetting him or her. This is the nature of suicide’s stigma. People do not comprehend the relation between mental illness and suicide. As a result, you’re confronted by their discomfort and pity, and ponder what derogatory questions they’re asking. “What kind of person terminates his own life with no consideration of its effect on those left behind?” “If he lost hope concerning this life, did he lose hope concerning the next life?” “Did he commit the unforgivable sin?” “Can we be certain she’s in heaven, or did her mental illness ultimately rob her of her faith in Christ?” You’re left feeling you don’t have a right to grieve like other believers, who experience not only sorrow in their loss, but joy, knowing their loved one is with their Savior. Deprived of this Christian joy, you conclude that the only way to cope with your loved one’s death is to expose suicide’s stigma for what it is: an unfair and public smear against those who lost the battle against mental illness. Yes, she was disturbed, but she wasn’t crazy! Yes, he was ill, but he wasn’t evil! Yes, she sinned, but she wasn’t damned for her sin!

You and your loved ones feel you’re branded by suicide’s stigma. If only you might shame those participating in spreading gossip, which would at least cure them of their ignorance! But there’s another way. Your alternative is to consider how Jesus was stigmatized in your place. Isaiah prophesies that “He was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities ... and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (ISA. 53:5–6). God might have discarded us, having been marked with the filthy rags of unrighteousness. Instead, He elected to mark Christ, His Son, as the sinner, and you and your loved one as holy, without the slightest spot or blemish. It’s why you have permission to grieve and receive with joy the Gospel’s promise. Regardless of how those around you perceive you, in the sight of God you are His untarnished child.

## ANGER AND GUILT

To grieve for a fellow believer is to share in the joy of our salvation. That’s assuming we’re not hindered in our grieving because of a second obstacle arriving on the scene. If we perceive we haven’t the right to grieve like other believers, instead of sharing our feelings of joy, we may discharge our feelings of anger. Perhaps you’ve sought a scapegoat for the suicide. You’re blaming a family member. He or she should have identified his illness sooner and gotten some help. Or you’re blaming God. Surely, He could have intervened and relieved her of her sense of hopelessness. Or suffering from guilt, you’re blaming yourself. “If only I had reminded my loved one how essential they were to our family!” You’re thinking, in any case, this death should not have happened! There must be a fall guy! It’s the only way, you imagine, that you may cope with your loved one’s suicide: if someone is held accountable.

When you point your finger at others, you may temporarily divert blame away from the deceased and yourself. However, it brings you

no joy in your mourning. You merely push others away and stand alone in your sorrow. Your alternative is to consider how God has provided the perfect scapegoat for us, offering up His Son as the propitiation for our sins and the sins of the world (1 JOHN 2:2). Rather than looking back at what you *might* have done, look back at what Christ most certainly *did* do for you both. “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (JOHN 1:29). You have permission to grieve with the community of saints where sorrow and joy coexist.

## INSUFFICIENT ANSWERS

Unless you identify various obstacles to grieving, your grieving will stall. But you want answers. Insufficient answers serve as another obstacle to grieving for the Christian suicide. To compensate for this, you’ve pursued a psychological explanation for the suicide. Maybe others will acknowledge your right to Christian grieving if you provide a rational account for what occurred. Everyone wants to know the same thing. Why did she resort to such drastic means of dealing with her anguish? Yes, life had become an increasing burden. He had a hard time coping with mounting hardships. But why did he lose all hope? Mourning families strive to cope by offering a plausible rationale for the tragedy. He despaired because there was no medication or treatment that offered him relief. She ended her life because her mental pain had become intolerable and unrelenting.

Then again, you will never obtain a completely satisfactory understanding of your family member’s suicide. There will always be another question about what might have been done. What tilted the scale, triggering the decision to end his or her pain right now? Your alternative is to turn your attention to what you *do* understand. Although you will never make absolute sense out of your loved one’s suicide, you can make perfect sense of the death of your Savior. “For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (MARK 10:45). It’s the essence of Christian joy and why you have permission to grieve. Your loved one was redeemed. She was baptized and saved by God’s untiring grace. Even while tormented by mental illness, she trusted in Jesus to deliver her from the afflictions of a faltering and sin-infested world. Despite her struggles, hopelessness and faulty conclusions, she remained in the faith. And so have you. Trusting in the Lord, you can make sense of what our merciful God would have you understand. Although you may not know what was going on in her *mind*, you are certain what was going on in her *heart*.

## THE TRAGEDY OF SUICIDE

An important part of grieving is having the freedom to talk about it. Like others in the family, he or she lost the battle to heart failure, a stroke, cancer. That having been said, you’re not allowed to correlate the death of your loved one to mental illness. People would not understand you if you suggested that she died of despair, or that his official

cause of death was “complications relating to major depression.” This creates another obstacle to grieving for the Christian suicide. You must acknowledge that it was an unnatural and unnecessary death, making it a tragedy. Hence, the death is too sad and unpleasant for comment. There is no sugarcoating how your loved one died. It was suicide. Instead of dying of old age, he gained access to a gun. Rather than dying in her sleep, she found a rope. He jumped. She suffocated. He overdosed. Predictably, because of the devastating nature of the so-called tragedy, you may have difficulty not simply talking about the death but accepting it. The only way you’ll cope with the death, you imagine, is if you label it as something other than a tragedy. Perhaps it was a blessing. As devastating as her death might seem, the world tells you her battle is over! She’s at peace!

There is an alternative, however, to obtaining peace from today’s secular chatter. Receive from the Scriptures the peace that surpasses all human understanding. Rather than accepting *death* for what it is, you accept *victory* in death. Christ has overcome death by dying His own death and by rising from death. You have permission to grieve because Christ died — in your place and in the place of your loved one — the most disturbing and tragic death conceivable. Christ, the Son of God, died by crucifixion for a world of sinners. Moreover, He died this death that that He might remove the sting of death, and that by rising from the dead He may give us the victory (**1 COR. 15:56–57**). Your loved one is at peace today, not because his suffering has ended through *his own* death, but because his suffering has ended through the death of *his Savior*, and because he is now with his Savior. And that’s the peace Jesus promises you this day: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid” (**JOHN 14:27**).

## THE SIN OF SUICIDE

You’re looking for healing today in the church. You’re promised you’ll receive it in God’s Word. Through Jesus’ atoning death is the forgiveness of sins, and through His resurrection victory over sin and everlasting life. But what about the sin of suicide? Notwithstanding the Lord’s promises, the family suicide continues to stare back at you. This comprises a final obstacle to your suicide grieving. Yes, he or she was a Christian! But what comfort is there for an evil death? Yes, your loved one is no longer in distress. You too are feeling relief as her pain has finally ended. But history has ruled. The act of suicide is a most grievous sin. By choosing to take her own life, she sinned against God, against you, your children and everyone who loved her. Accordingly, you’ve reached an impasse. On the one hand, you’re convinced you will not cope with your loved one’s suicide unless you can forget his shameful, brutal act.

On the other hand, you’re not permitted to disremember what happened in your family. “My sin is ever before me,” you infer (**PS. 51:3**).

Inasmuch as depression and despair are traced back to one’s sinful nature, they have the power to kill. Thankfully, there’s an alternative to grieving as the world grieves, with no hope. You grieve as a Christian. God’s grace, you see, has infinitely more power than sin — it has the power to save. Yes, she died a sinner! But she also died in God’s grace! In the words of St. Paul, “But where sin increased, grace abounded all the more” (**ROM. 5:20**). Yes, sin has tarnished every single one of us. “Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me” (**PS. 51:5**). However, in Baptism your Savior has washed away every stain of yours, designating you and your dearly loved as His children bound to everlasting salvation. As the apostle declares, “He saved us ... by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit ... so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life” (**TITUS 3:5–7**). You have permission to grieve because the hope and joy Jesus gives to His baptized, He gives you.

## CONCLUSION

When we grieve and sorrow, we acknowledge the power of sin in our lives. We concur that “the wages of sin is death” (**ROM. 6:23**). But sometimes our grieving stalls and we’d rather not explain our sorrow. You weep this day because of the sin of your loved one and, in your opinion perhaps, because of your personal sin. Your loved one took her life and you, it seems, failed to intervene and acquire for her the proper care. In either case, you’d rather keep the nasty details to yourself. If you retreat into your private space, you may cry without being judged or pitied.

There’s an alternative, however, to mourning alone and reinforcing the belief that you haven’t permission to grieve as other Christians do, with both sorrow and joy. Recognize your opportunity to “rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep” (**ROM. 12:15**). Accept the support of those who, instead of honoring your private space, would offer you a place of refuge. Connect with family and friends who also miss your loved one. And enjoy the benefits of our Father’s house and of Christian conversation. Understand that your greatest comfort is not that under all the pain or distorted thinking, your beloved will be known for their Christian example rather than their suicide. Your greatest comfort is that he or she is known by Jesus, our Good Shepherd, who laid down His life for the sheep (**JOHN 10:14–15**). It’s your comfort today. Jesus has taken what’s said to be disturbing, indecent, evil and tragic and left in its place His little lamb covered with His righteousness.

If you are depressed or thinking about harming yourself or someone else, please call 911 immediately or call or text 988 to reach the national 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline. Other help lines are available, such as the Crisis Text Line at 741-741. Visit [988lifeline.org](http://988lifeline.org) and [crisistextline.org](http://crisistextline.org).