



I Will Grieve for the **Suicide**

Gospel Comfort for Loved
Ones Left Behind

by **Peter Preus**

edited by Rachel Bomberger

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In memory of Jean, who is no longer sad but, having fought the good fight, having finished the race, having been saved by grace through faith, is now in the presence of her Savior.

My continued gratitude to Julie, who has stood by me with unyielding support in my resolve to comfort those who grieve for a suicide.



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PREFACE

REMEMBER THAT PHONE CALL well — better, in fact, than many of the events that followed it.

My wife, Jean, had been in severe distress for months, suffering from major depression and anxiety. I was out of town attending a national church convention, rooming with a fellow pastor, when she phoned. She wanted me to fly back home, but she couldn't tell me why. I knew from the frantic tone of her voice on the other end of the line that she was in dire need of help, but I knew, too, that I would not be reaching out to any of the Christian brothers with me at the convention. As far as I was concerned, they were the last ones who should know anything about our private struggles. I didn't even want my friend and roommate to overhear me as I attempted to reason with my wife. I was terrified that he might get the wrong (or perhaps worse, the *right*) impression. So I locked myself in the bathroom and wedged a towel underneath the door to muffle my voice. It seemed imperative that Jean's fight remain between her and me and a handful of discreet medical and psychiatric professionals. Things surely could not be as serious as Jean believed they were. That's what I thought then, and that's what I told her on the phone that night.

Two months later, Jean was gone. She was 41 years old, a lifelong Christian, a dedicated pastor's wife and the devoted mother of

six young children. And in a moment, she was gone. She chose to end her long battle with mental illness by taking her own life.

How do you prepare for a loved one's suicide? You don't. You can't. Suicide incites horror and apprehension in everyone who values God's gift of life. Preparing for it is unthinkable. When I found my wife unresponsive that day, lying in a fetal position in an isolated room in our basement, I was completely unprepared for what came next. My world fell apart.

Unlike that night at the convention that I remember so clearly, the days immediately following Jean's suicide come back to my mind only through a fog of grief and panic. I dimly recall the ambulance arriving, and Jean being resuscitated and rushed to the hospital. I don't remember at all phoning babysitters to come stay with my two youngest daughters, but I know I must have done so. I do remember (and have wished I didn't) overhearing a nurse in the ICU saying, "There's too much brain damage. I don't think she's going to regain consciousness." Thirty-six hours later, the nurse's grim prognosis proved true. Jean never woke up.

I also don't remember telling my parishioners that my wife had committed suicide. They soon found out, but not from me. I couldn't say the words out loud. Perhaps both the fog and the silence were a sort of defense mechanism. If I didn't remember or acknowledge or speak the truth, perhaps I could avoid *facing* the truth of what had happened — and of what Jean's suicide would mean for my family and me.

It's now been 26 years since Jean's death, but in many ways my grieving process is still going on even today. I sometimes wonder if it will ever really end. Only by turning again and again to the Word of God — by clinging in faith to the Son of God who died for Jean's sins and mine — have I come to find a measure of comfort and peace in the aftermath of her suicide. It is this comfort and peace that I hope to share with you in the pages that follow.

If you have lost someone you love to suicide and are struggling, this book is especially for you. If you are a Christian pastor, teacher or other servant leader seeking to minister to those whose lives have been touched by suicide, this book is also for you. If you are simply a concerned Christian troubled by the prevalence of suicide in this broken world who wants to learn to think and talk about it theologically, this book is for you, too.

Whoever you are, I invite you to walk with me to the foot of the cross as we learn to say — boldly, unashamedly, together — I will grieve for the suicide.

INTRODUCTION

The paradox of Christian suicide

Christians aren't supposed to commit suicide. And yet they do. Inasmuch as everyone is a sinner, everyone is susceptible to the kind of mental illness that can cause them to despair of hope in this life. And this includes the Christian. Think, for example, of pastor and writer Jarrid Wilson, who died by suicide in 2019 after an ongoing struggle with depression. "Hope gets the last word. Jesus gets the last word," his wife recalled him saying many times.¹ How, then, did suicide get the last word in his life?

Christian families aren't supposed to be scarred by suicide. And yet they are. Recent studies now show that about a third (32 percent) of churchgoers polled report that a close acquaintance or family member has died by suicide. Suicide, in fact, is the second leading cause of death for Americans ages 15 to 34.² What's going on?

Suicide is a sin, and Christians mourning a suicide feel themselves under intense (if not unspoken) pressure to grieve

¹ Juli Wilson (@itsjuliwilson), "My loving, giving, kind-hearted, encouraging, handsome, hilarious, give the shirt of his back husband went to be with Jesus late last night..." Instagram photo, September 10, 2019, [instagram.com/p/B2Pry3eA88W/](https://www.instagram.com/p/B2Pry3eA88W/)

² Bob Smietana, "1 in 3 Protestant Churchgoers Personally Affected by Suicide," *Christianity Today*, September 29, 2017, [christianitytoday.com/news/2017/september/protestant-churches-pastors-views-on-suicide-aacc-liberty.html](https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2017/september/protestant-churches-pastors-views-on-suicide-aacc-liberty.html).

carefully and privately, in a way that reflects both the shame of their loved one's sin and the uncertainty they are supposed to feel over his or her eternal destiny. Yet those same Christians are also encouraged to confess boldly their faith in Christ crucified for the forgiveness of sins. All sins. Including suicide. How can this be?

In my first book, *And She Was a Christian*,³ I addressed pastors and church workers concerning the paradoxes surrounding a Christian suicide. Those paradoxes come fully to light in the questions people routinely ask in the aftermath of suicide — questions which, especially if they go unanswered, make it very hard to talk openly about suicide in the church. “How could he lose sight of God's unwavering care and conclude suicide was the answer? He was a Christian!” “How could she lose all hope and despair of God's many blessings? She was a Christian!”

In this new book — written less for pastors and more for the loved ones left behind — I'll look not only at these painful paradoxes but also at some of the many other questions that suicide leaves unanswered: Why didn't I see it coming? Why didn't God intervene? Did she really want to kill herself? What more could I have done? Why doesn't a psychological explanation of what happened satisfy me? Can I be certain that he's in heaven? Did her mental illness rob her of her faith in Christ at the end? What are my children going to think? My parents? My church? Why is there so much shame and guilt mixed in with my grief?

If you have lost a loved one to suicide, you probably wish you could silence the questions and go for just a day or two without being confronted by the ignorance and pity of those who cannot possibly understand what you're going through. You're likely thinking, “I just want to grieve like others who lose a parent or spouse or child!” But the reality of the suicide keeps showing

³ Peter Preus, *And She Was a Christian: Why Do Believers Commit Suicide?* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2011).

its head, mocking your pain, whispering in your ear, “You don’t have the *right* to grieve like others!”

Fighting the good fight

As one who also grieves for a Christian who died of suicide, I understand what it’s like to struggle to cope in suicide’s aftermath. For me, it’s been more than a struggle. It’s been a knock-down, drag-out fight. It began with the sucker punch to the gut that was my wife’s death and has continued throughout all the years that have followed. I’ve gone round after round, bruised-and-bloody against enemies like stigma, guilt, anger and doubt as I’ve tried to come to terms with my loss.

It’s this metaphor of the bare-knuckle boxing match that you’ll see reflected in the chapter titles for this book. As much as I tried to find another, equally apt metaphor — I myself am no boxer and I can’t remember the last time I’ve watched a match — I kept ending up back in the ring where I started. And perhaps that’s the way it is with suicide. It attacks the weak, the out-of-shape, the noncombatants. There is no training regimen that can prepare you for what’s coming. Once it throws that first punch, ready or not, you are in for the fight of your life.

In using this metaphor of the boxing match, I’m also echoing the words and metaphors of Saint Paul. “Fight the good fight of the faith,” he told his protégé and fellow pastor Timothy in 1 Timothy 6:12. “Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and about which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.” Later, writing near the time of his death, Paul echoed the same language again: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith” (2 TIM. 4:7).

In the chapters that follow, then, we will look at what it means to “fight the good fight of faith” after suicide as we track the course of that fight blow by blow. We’ll examine some of the unique challenges that Christians face immediately after a suicide, and

we'll look at some of the very human ways in which we respond to those challenges. We'll compare the separate insights that psychology and theology bring to our understanding of suicide, exploring both the limits of worldly wisdom and the depths of the wisdom and knowledge of God. Ultimately, by God's grace, we'll learn what it means to grieve in true Christian hope for someone who has died by suicide.

As we go, I'll share parts of my own story and Jean's, woven together with a series of common yet hypothetical scenarios: the aging mother, the teenage daughter, the husband with young children and so on. I've employed this hypothetical approach so that I may explore certain aspects of suicide through the lens of imagination (rather than exclusively through my own personal history). It is my hope that, as a result, you may find in this book a scenario that better reflects your own experience.

We'll also look together throughout the book at a number of biblical texts that help to shed light on the paradox of a Christian's suicide. We'll grapple with several passages that show an obvious connection to our subject matter, but we'll also examine many others that are perhaps less obvious but no less useful to us as we undertake the complicated task of grieving after suicide.

Gospel for the grieving

Where is the Gospel after suicide? Under ordinary circumstances, when Christians die, we who grieve for them in the church smile through our tears. We mourn their death and our loss, certainly, but we also confess that Christ has redeemed our loved ones by His death on the cross. We affirm with confidence and hope that God has called them home according to His gracious will, and that they now rest from their labors in His presence, awaiting the promised resurrection.

Can we really make the same joyful confession after suicide? It is my firm belief that we can, and in this book I intend to show

how the Gospel speaks comfort to us at every stage of the grieving process. We can never rejoice over a suicide, but neither can we ever *stop* rejoicing at the grace of Christ.

The questions, paradoxes and stigma surrounding suicide can certainly get in the way of our Christian grieving process. When we truly understand and cling to God's grace for the despairing sinner, however, we may indeed grieve as those who have certain hope in God's salvation. Christ has offered up His own blood as a ransom for every sin, including suicide. You may therefore grieve as the Lord intends for you to grieve. Rejoice in His victory over sin and death, having every confidence that "he will wipe away every tear from (your) eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away" (REV. 21:4).

You may not feel like you can believe this now, and that's OK. Read on. In "Gospel for the grieving" sections at the end of each chapter, we'll come back to this truth again and again. Your loved one may have died in the worst way imaginable, but our God is bigger than suicide — and His love in Christ is stronger than death.

Do not be intimidated by the stigma, shame, uncertainty or doubt that suicide brings into your life. You may face them all head on, saying, "My beloved has fought the good fight. He has kept the faith. And as for me, *I will grieve for the suicide.*"

A few disclaimers before we begin ...

1. This book is not intended for the one who would justify taking his life. Under no circumstance may a Christian condone suicide. My purpose in writing is to comfort the believer who has been left behind. Christian families are not immune to mental illness, hopelessness, despair or suicidal ideations. Christians too, unfortunately, choose suicide. That doesn't make it right or good. Suicide is always a tragedy.

2. This book is especially relevant in cases in which the person you know who has committed suicide was a baptized, believing Christian prior to their death. In fact, throughout the book, when I make reference to a suicide, I will be referring to a Christian unless otherwise specified. If this is not the case in your life, I would encourage you to turn to the list of recommended resources provided at the end of this book. Other books may speak more directly to your grief than this one (though I would, of course, encourage you to read this one, too).

3. In Chapter 3 (“Fancy Footwork”), I have sought to contrast psychological and theological perspectives on suicide. Some readers might draw from this that I feel antagonistic towards psychology and see no place for it in the Christian life. This could not be further from the truth. During the last painful years of her life, my late wife Jean was eager to visit several psychiatric and medical professionals, and I was grateful for the treatment they provided her. Psychologists and licensed counselors are a great gift to God’s people, and if you or a loved one is sinking into mental illness, I would encourage you to seek professional help. While psychological and psychiatric treatment cannot provide the eternal life, salvation and spiritual wellbeing that God alone gives us through the Gospel, they can do much to help relieve mental illness and restore a suffering person to health and a measure of wholeness.

ROUND 1: SUCKER PUNCH

Shock, Stigma and Shame in the Aftermath of Suicide

MY ENCOUNTER with suicide was never a fair fight. Despite all the warning signs, I never even saw it coming. I was completely unprepared for the blow, and when it struck, it hit me right in the gut — a sucker punch if ever there was one — before I even had time to raise my fists. In the immediate aftermath, it left me stunned and immobilized, speechless and wheezing, with the wind knocked out of me, vulnerable to further attacks.

Jean's first attempt to kill herself was with our son's BB gun. Her aim was good, but the lack of force behind the BB left her only injured, not killed. I have a feeling she was half expecting this. In any event, she was released from the local hospital the same day. Was she trying to get my attention? If so, she certainly succeeded. We redoubled our efforts to help her get to the bottom of her chronic depression. Regrettably, we failed. In her next attempt, Jean used a plastic bag to bring about asphyxiation. This second strategy was foolproof.

I had known she was sick. I had even known she was desperate. But she had been getting treatment, and it seemed to be making a positive difference. I thought she was

getting better. I couldn't have guessed how close she was to ending it all.

I couldn't admit the truth of Jean's illness — and later, her death — to myself, let alone to others. As a result, what I did and didn't say was at first guided more by the stigma of suicide than by truth. It wasn't as though Jean asked me to keep her secret. She didn't have to. I believed it was my duty, and my justification for doing so was, as I saw it, flawless. Every dedicated husband and wife protect each other. They don't embarrass one another by exposing private vulnerabilities. Like Jean, I would put on a brave face when others were watching. People didn't need to know of her struggles or the repercussions of her illness. It wasn't their fight.

When Jean died, I did not immediately tell even my children the truth of how she died. I told them Mom's heart just stopped working. It was a delaying tactic and not particularly helpful. A few days after Jean's funeral some neighborhood kids stopped by the house, but not to play. They had something they wanted to say and wasted no time getting to the point. My oldest daughter related the particulars to me later that day. "We heard your mommy killed herself by putting a bag over her head!" the heartless kids told them. They wanted to know if it was true. In that moment, I knew my efforts to run damage control and protect my children from the dreadful truth of their mother's suicide had backfired.

Breaking the news to my parishioners was no easier than telling my children. I agonized over what to say and how to say it. Shall I make what was sure to be reiterated as a scandalous announcement after Sunday's service, or shall I rely on the grapevine? Shall I trust the people to put the best construction on how this could happen, leaving them with even more questions? Or shall I cut to the chase and

publicly condemn her sin? Shall I give a detailed explanation of her mental illness, as I had thus far kept that chapter of Jean's life secret? Or shall I remain steadfast in my silence? In the end, I would depend on the grapevine, avoid talking about Jean's death, and hide my grief. I still wonder if this was ultimately the best approach.

Grieving for your elderly mother

You're having a hard time processing your loss. It's so difficult to believe that your mother is gone. She had just turned 70, but she was as healthy as many in their early 60s. *Did this really happen? What do I do now?* Shock is a common aspect of grieving, you know, but this feeling of shock runs even deeper. You're unable to accept the death. *Why did she do this?* you ask. *I know she had been having a difficult time after she retired. Then Dad died, and she was left feeling extremely lonely. Apparently, this triggered her major depressive episode. But why end her life? Others suffer the same loss and manage to move on. How was I to see this coming? How am I to process it?* You're not simply feeling numb because of your unexpected and staggering loss. You're feeling paralyzed. How do you even react? How do you explain what happened to others? Do they even need to know?

But many do know. In fact, you feel like the entire world is scrutinizing both your mother and her family. How can you spin things in the aftermath? How can you protect yourself and your mother from the awful stigma of suicide? You would love to receive sympathy and support in your grief, but is that even possible when you're grieving for a suicide?

You're tempted to avoid the subject of how she died altogether. Otherwise, people are bound to recoil in discomfort, quickly exclaiming, "Oh, I'm so sorry!" (It is evident by their tone of voice and awkward expression that what they mean to say is, "Oh my! I had no idea your mother was so troubled! I'm sorry I brought it up! What do I say now?") Clearly, speaking about

your loss would be a whole lot easier if the words “suicide” or “self-murder” didn’t have to enter the discussion. How much simpler it would be to tell your friends and acquaintances that the official cause of your mother’s death was “complications of major depression.” If only you could.

An evil death

In the immediate aftermath of a suicide close to you, it’s hard to know which end is up. The unexpected blow leaves you stunned and desperate to find a way to cope not simply with the shock of a tragic and unexpected *death* but with the *stigma* and shame that go hand in glove with a suicide. You’re in a daze, unable to absorb your loss, and left with a host of uncomfortable questions: “What do I do now? What am I supposed to think about what has happened? What do I tell others? Shall I deny the plain facts? Why can’t I just hide from the truth and pretend she was killed in a car accident? Why do I feel so ashamed to tell people how he really died?”

An old prayer of the church begs God to “preserve us ... from anguish of heart and despair of Thy mercy, and from an evil death.”⁴ The words of this prayer — which seem to have gone spectacularly unanswered in your loved one’s life — may ring in your head, mocking you. “An evil death.” Death can hardly get any more evil than this.

And yet it can. Grieving for a suicide includes the elements not only of a tragic and unexpected death but of instinctively trying to shield your loved one’s memory from the pervasive stigma that’s inevitably associated with a suicide.

Consider how friends and relatives respond to the news of a death under other circumstances. People want to know if the cause of death was a surprise. Was there a family history with

⁴ “The Order of the Holy Communion,” in *The Lutheran Hymnal* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1941), 24.

strokes? Had she been battling her cancer for some time? Did she have a lot of pain? Did he die a peaceful death? When a family member dies by suicide, the conversation changes considerably. There's awkward silence. Words are chosen carefully, and eye contact is hard to sustain. Any details about the deceased are uncomfortable for the listener, and even more uncomfortable for the one doing the talking. You're grieving a death, but it's a forbidden death. An evil death.

This stigma surrounding suicide is centuries in the making and has its roots in faulty understandings both of mental illness and theology. Under suicide's stigma, the deceased is branded as cowardly or crazy or selfish. Moreover, those of us who grieve for them are presumed ignorant, remiss, overbearing or in some other way at fault for what happened. Surely, the stigma tells us, there is at the very least a troubled family to blame. The stigma tries hard to convince us that such a person couldn't possibly have trusted in God, that they could not have been a true Christian and that they are likely now suffering in hell.

The stigma of suicide also cuts us off from the comfort and encouragement we might otherwise receive from fellow believers and compels us to hide our grief from anyone who might be made uncomfortable by it. Inasmuch as the means of death is prohibited and deemed preventable, it's easier all around not to talk about it at all than to consider how you might support the family in their grief. "It's got to be painful for them to talk about this fiasco," the stigma whispers. "So why even bring it up in the first place?"

A legacy of stigma

It is only recently that we have fully begun to understand the major role that chronic mental illness plays in driving people to suicide. For centuries prior, people generally assumed the worst about the suicide, both before and after their death. This

troubled history has helped create and enforce the persistent stigma that surrounds the act of suicide to this day.

In the Middle Ages, the church viewed the suicide not simply as disturbed or weak willed but as demon possessed. This was the only way medieval Christians could find to explain such a horrific act. It took just one more step to argue most logically that the demon had taken over the soul of this believer and that, consequently, he or she could no longer be regarded as a Christian.

Immediately the sentence was carried out — not on the soul of the suicide, who was already gone, but on his remains, which were desecrated to prevent the demon from possessing another person. To confuse the demon before it had a chance to exit the corpse, the body was dragged face down. To deter others from considering suicide, the corpse would be burned. No better visual could be offered to show that this person was damned and suffering the fires of hell. To prevent the corpse from resurrecting and disturbing the living, stakes were driven through the body, or the body was dismembered.

Although we no longer treat the bodies of suicides so violently and disrespectfully, the fear and misunderstanding that once drove Christians to such gruesome behavior have lingered much longer. As recently as the 1960s, Catholics who committed suicide were not allowed to receive a Catholic funeral or be buried in Catholic cemeteries.⁵ As recently as 2014, the Church of England was still arguing whether Canon Law should be amended to allow priests to use the same funeral rites for suicides as for any other Anglican.⁶ Given this troubled history,

⁵ Candida Moss, “The Catholic Church’s Own Complicated History with Suicide,” *Daily Beast*, December 23, 2018, thedailybeast.com/the-catholic-churchs-own-complicated-history-with-suicide.

⁶ Harry de Quetteville, “The Church of England Should Bury Suicides Like Everyone Else,” *The Telegraph*, November 18, 2014, telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/11238757/The-Church-of-England-should-bury-suicides-like-everyone-else.html.

is it any wonder that Christian families today find it so hard to grieve publicly after suicide?

Suicide's stigma: A triple brand

Suicide's stigma is ultimately about more than punishing those who commit or contribute to a suicide. It is about protecting oneself from the fallout and implications of someone else's misfortune. While acknowledging the devastation of what has happened, those looking in from the outside feel a strong compulsion to label the suicide as abnormal or substandard — anything that will allow them to believe that they are safe from suicide and that such a tragedy would never happen in *their* family. The reality that suicide and mental illness can affect any person, any family, is too painful to acknowledge.

Hence the stigma. It's much easier to block out the truth of what has really happened and characterize the suicide in one of three ways:

1. A mark of madness or cowardice

What other possible explanation is there for the suicide?

Your mother was either crazy or copping out on life. Had she chosen to get her act together, snap out of her funk, take her meds and be a little more courageous, she would still be here today.

2. A mark of family dysfunction

It's not that she was a bad person, but there's no denying that she came from a dysfunctional family. Those in her household had their issues, and it's no surprise that she did, too. Her family's obvious weaknesses left her fragile, more susceptible to losing her way. Your mother would be alive today if only those around her hadn't been so messed up — if her father had been more caring, her mother less critical, her husband less work-obsessed, her children more attentive.

3. A mark of unbelief

The fact that your mother struggled to trust God to care for her on a daily basis must mean she wasn't fully trusting in Christ for forgiveness of sins and life everlasting. If she had despaired of hope for this life, how could she have had hope in Christ for the life to come? If she despised her daily existence so much that she believed it necessary to kill herself, doesn't it stand to reason that she must also have despised and rejected God's Word and the message of His grace?

Fear and ignorance

You want to explain what happened. Your mother did not choose to be incapacitated by some surprise mental disorder! Having her life forever turned inside out wasn't her idea of enjoying her golden years. But you struggle to find the words — and the people around you are not making it very easy. Why can't they stop judging your mother and put the best construction on things?

In many instances, they are afraid. As I touched on briefly above, suicide's stigma is fed largely by fear. Consciously or unconsciously, people are terrified that, unless they can brand this individual or his family in some horrendous way, they must themselves face the reality that someone *they* love could suffer the same misfortune. There is, after all, no vaccine for mental illness. The stigma thus offers those who embrace it some level of comfort and protection. If they can believe that suicide was the result of an appalling and abnormal set of circumstances, they can then cling to the belief that they and their own loved ones will never suffer the same fate. "We're not crazy or dysfunctional," they can tell themselves. "We don't lack trust in God." The stigma thus makes even those closest to you shy away in fear. A friend or loved one may want very much to help you with your grief, but they may also unconsciously feel it's more

important for them to keep their distance — only then can they keep believing that those they love are immune to suicide.

In other instances, suicide's stigma is fueled by ignorance. Many people still lack the most basic knowledge regarding depression and other mental illnesses. Friends imagine that a person's depression is all in her head, or that it will run its course and clear up in due time. They observe an acquaintance's hopelessness — his feelings of sadness, anxiety, dejection, prolonged mourning or the loss of joy with living — but they fail to recognize that these symptoms represent a real illness. They argue that her condition might be best managed by tracing her symptoms back to what is causing her stress and making appropriate modifications in her life. If only she can take a few key steps to turn her life around, they reason, she'll feel better. They fail to recognize that depression, like any other illness, is best treated with the proper medication or therapy (or both) and that, like any other illness, sometimes the best treatment in the world cannot cure it.

The pervasive stigma surrounding suicide and mental illness — rooted in centuries of faulty understanding and fed even today by fear and ignorance — is as untrue as it is unhelpful.

Hiding your grief

Death is so personal. Many who have recently lost a loved one — if they were able — in fact, would much rather hide their grief altogether. They may be afraid that if they mourn openly, it will reveal they are weak. Predictably, such people withdraw from the public eye after a death in the family, indicating rightly that they need a break from life's everyday obligations.

After a suicide, there's an added level to the cover-up. It goes beyond the privacy of grief to a secret shame. As you struggle to mourn the loss of your mother, you don't talk about your reason for grieving. This might reveal that your mother was weak and troubled. It might also give others opportunity to judge you as harsh, abusive or uncaring. At best, you were ignorant or

complacent, doing little to lessen their struggles. At worst, you were guilty of pushing her over the edge. So you put on a brave face and go into full “damage control” mode, hiding both pain and shame.

Concerned observers, unsure how they can relate to your loss or offer you support, may prefer that you mask your grief. They may wish to avoid what they regard as that dreaded conversation: talking about the suicide. They may assume you will not appreciate what they might have to say to you at this time — that the truth will be too painful right now. They may want to give you some space to heal without their intruding. Just give it a little time, they say to justify their silence. When you’re ready to emerge from the fog of grief, you will find your way back. Then they can resume their relationship with you.

Perhaps you’re happy with this arrangement. Grieving for a suicide can be traumatizing in the early going. Maybe you prefer to keep your sorrow to yourself. It’s certainly easier. Why interact with people only to be forced to face yesterday’s heartbreak?

The question is worth pondering: Which is more important, sheltering friends and family from the ugly particulars regarding your mother’s death, or encouraging them to speak openly and honestly with you as you mourn together? Let’s assume that at least some of your acquaintances desire to put the best construction on things and explain the suicide in the kindest way. Do you want their help?

Maybe you don’t — but maybe you should. To retreat into your grief is to reside in your own segregated world. You may feel you need some “alone time” to grieve at your own pace and in your own way. Yet while this may feel safe and comforting in the short term, it isn’t the way to heal and thrive in the long term. We all need to be around people. Whether in life’s struggles or death’s burdens, God created you to be there for others, and others to be there for you. Time alone to grieve may, in fact, be the last thing you need.

The Christian community

Think back to the first time Jesus appeared to His disciples after rising from the dead (JOHN 20:19–23). In one brief instant the Lord dispelled their fears and restored their hope in His victory over death. He came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you” (JOHN 20:26).

Thomas, however, was not with them, the text points out. Why is that? We’re not told specifically. But it’s quite possible that he was avoiding the disciples and other believers. Maybe he was grieving for his Savior in his own way: alone. Rather than awaiting Christ’s peace and seeking comfort from the other disciples, he went into hiding. Naturally, this didn’t accomplish anything and wasn’t at all what he needed. It would only aggravate his depression and self-pity.

What Thomas needed most was Christ. He also needed the fellowship of those who knew and loved Christ as he did. Both of those things could only be found in the upper room — the one place he had chosen not to be. Thomas might have known better. Because he had attempted to work out his own peace, he missed out on the comfort and reassurance that his fellow disciples received.

You’d prefer to be with other Christians. Unfortunately, you’ve convinced yourself that spending time in church will only intensify your sense of shame. Members of the parish, presumably, will either shun you or feel sorry for you. In either case, your attendance on Sunday morning will simply produce uneasiness for everyone present. You were hoping your pastor might alleviate your fears regarding your mother — reassure you that, despite her frightful and seemingly inconceivable death, she is forgiven. Unfortunately, he chose not to talk about the suicide at all during the funeral sermon. And since then, although he has stopped by once and visited with your family, neither he nor you had the courage to address the thing that is most interfering with your grieving. His silence has led you to wonder if there

really is no suitable explanation for how a Christian could take her own life.

Left alone to grieve

Desiring a measure of privacy for yourself and your family after a suicide is one thing. Masking your grief is something quite different. It comes at a cost, forcing you to mourn alone. Hiding the truth from others, you deprive yourself of needed encouragement from the very ones who have been called to give it to you freely: your Christian family and friends. With no one to talk to, you stifle healing, allowing your personal shame to dictate how and even *whether* you grieve. True, you may suppose that barring the doors of your comfortable quiet space is better than enduring the judgment of others. Like Thomas before he was greeted by the resurrected Christ, you may attempt to work out your own peace. However, as Thomas found out, the choice to mourn in this way has consequences — not only for you, but also for the members of your family and church community. Rather than seeking comfort from one another, each of you goes in your own direction. In your attempt to hide from the dreadful shame of what happened, you deny the truth and cut yourself off from the things that make for peace.

We consider where this approach got Thomas. Even after his friends shared the glad tidings that Christ is alive, Thomas refused to leave the pit of grief: “But he said to them, ‘Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe’” (JOHN 20:25). Unable to share the peace the other disciples had been given, he was left alone in the dark of doubt.

Perhaps this is the environment you’ve selected for yourself. You don’t know how to deal with your recent loss and devastation — your mother being snatched from your life, acquaintances maligning her with their disparaging labels. So you choose to remain alone in your grief. Unless you, like Thomas, obtain

concrete and indisputable evidence from your brothers and sisters in the congregation to the contrary, you will not believe they really care. You will not trust them for encouragement.

If I am describing your set of circumstances — you long for understanding and support, you hope one day to experience it, but right now you just don't know how — let me assure you: it isn't really beyond your reach. Real support comes not from confronting unfair judgments about your mother. It comes from trusting your fellow Christians and joining with them for mutual consolation and edification from God's Word. "[Do not neglect] to meet together, as is the habit of some," the apostle exhorts each of us, "but [encourage] one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near" (HEB. 10:25). No one, after all, need be left out of God's family. "Blessed be the ... God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God" (2 COR. 1:3-4).

A safe place to grieve

Put yourself once again in Thomas's shoes and imagine the difference between Christ's two appearances in the upper room from his perspective. In the first, Thomas is shut out, sunk deeply into his own private grief, too afraid or ashamed or confused to be with the only people who can truly understand what he's going through. In the second, Thomas, by choice or happenstance, is in the right place at the right time. How different, then, is Christ's second visit to that room:

Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" (JOHN 20:26-28)

“Peace be with you.” Note that Thomas — even while he struggles with unwarranted doubt — is given the means to believe, to be encouraged and to reunite with his brothers. What but Christ’s Word can work within the grieving heart the very promise it utters? What but the message of Jesus Christ crucified and risen can offer us peace, drawing us back into the fellowship of believers?

It’s all right for you to grieve, for you have a safe place to do so in the presence of other Christians. Your tears, in any case, do not convey that you’ve acquiesced to suicide’s stigma or doubt whether your loved one is in heaven. We believe that Jesus died and rose again. And so are we assured that God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep (1 THESS. 4:14).

Let your pastor and fellow parishioners offer you their love and support, remembering always that the Divine Service is the Lord’s gift to you, and a precious opportunity each time for you to receive the Gospel. Suicide’s stigma will not have the final say. Even if, in the worst-case scenario, people mark and avoid you, defriend you, or betray your mother’s reputation, remember that the only mark that matters is God’s mark. And His mark no one could remove from your mother. By Holy Baptism Jesus marked both you and your mother with His personal righteousness! By the water combined with God’s Word He dressed you with the garment of salvation that He secured for you on the cross. This very day you stand before God in His holy court, blameless in His sight!

Gospel for the grieving

You conceal the truth to ease the sorrow, and to protect yourself from hurt. In reality, you are depriving yourself the opportunity to grieve and others the opportunity to grieve with you. You’re also denying the Lord the opportunity to comfort you in your grief. It’s unnecessary. Let Christ do the damage control by sustaining you through your truest source of strength: His Word.

Suicide is shameful. There is nothing good or praiseworthy about it. It's OK to acknowledge that truth. You receive your greatest consolation as a Christian, though, not when you figure out the best way to save face, but when you remember what Christ has done with your shame — and with your mother's shame, and even with the shame of the entire world. In order to deliver you from sin's shame, your Lord Jesus became the object of shame. Taking on our human form, He humbled Himself, "becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (PHIL. 2:8). He has covered up your shame with His own precious blood.

"The reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth," the Lord has promised in His Word (1S. 25:8). Trusting in this promise, we can boldly pray: "You know my reproach, and my shame and my dishonor ... let your salvation, O God, set me on high!" (PS. 69:19, 29). With our eyes fixed on the cross, we can even sing: "I will greatly rejoice in the Lord; my soul shall exult in my God, for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteousness" (1S. 61:10).

I feel deep shock at the death of my loved one, and my pain is even greater when I consider the shame and stigma surrounding such an evil death as this. Even so, I will trust in Christ, and I will grieve for the suicide.

ROUND 2: SEEING RED

Anger, Blame, Guilt and the Search for a Scapegoat

THE SUCKER PUNCH of Jean's suicide hit me out of the blue. It was below the belt, totally unfair and contrary to the rules of good sportsmanship. Shortly later, I confess, I saw red for a time. I was in pain, yes, but I was also angry. Someone had to be at fault in my wife's death. Someone was surely to blame. Like a boxer who goes berserk in the ring and lets blind rage wash over his body, I lashed out, hoping to shift the shame, guilt and grief I was feeling onto someone else. I was hurting, and they should hurt, too — they certainly deserved to.

I blamed Jean's doctors and nurses for failing to recognize how sick she was and treat her appropriately. I blamed her father for (as I saw it) raising her to judge herself harshly and in a way that contributed to her anxiety and depression. I blamed church members, whom Jean had regarded as friends, for failing to be there for her and care for her as they should. I blamed society as a whole for the stigma it places on mental illness — a stigma that in every way stymied Jean's efforts to be honest about her condition and find healing. More explicitly, I blamed our indifferent

culture, which embraces suicide's stigma with no thought of changing its twisted mentality.

When I could find no one else to blame, I blamed myself, carrying a secret guilt around with me like an albatross around my neck. I might have asked my questions out loud for others to hear, as many of my loved ones, I'm sure, were asking the same thing. "Why didn't I anticipate where things were heading? Her many symptoms were as plain as day! Why didn't I offer to lighten her load? I could have taken some time off work to spend with the kids! Why didn't I get her out of the house more, help her get her mind off her life's many stresses? Why didn't I track her down that final morning and tell her one more time, 'I love you!'" But rather than seeking comfort from my family, I shut myself off from them. I chose to keep my emotions to myself.

I do not recall specifically blaming God (though I know many others in similar situations have done so), but I certainly was not happy with my family's crushing loss. Under other circumstances, my children and I would have spent the last few days at Jean's bedside. Our wife and mom was preparing to die. However, not only did God fail to prevent her suicide, but He also took her so quickly from us that we were not granted any time to say goodbye to her. Was this really God's will?! Who else, if not Him, could have intervened to save my wife?

Tellingly, I never blamed Jean for her decision to commit suicide. This wasn't because I was especially forgiving or had an exceptional understanding of the frightening effects of mental illness. You might call it stubborn pride on my part. I would not give in to the stigma that stained my wife's reputation. Rather than spotlighting my wife's deficiencies and spurning the one I had vowed to love and honor, I would take aim at all the other fools who had

contributed to or even just dared to fasten shame to the sickness and death of a loving wife and mother.

Grieving for your young adult son

If it was not said, it was implied. You were “out to lunch” as a father, dismissive of your son’s cries for help. Or you were overbearing, giving him no other choice but to act so desperately, so drastically. You have reacted by cutting off all communication from the apparent accusers. You have determined if you can’t shut them up, you can at least shut them out. It has been your way of fighting your brash emotions: isolating yourself from anyone who’s failed to express proper empathy and support. Tired of defending yourself and your son, you’ve decided to go on the offense. No, you cannot deny the facts. He committed suicide. But is he the one who should be put on trial? Are you?

You love your son, and you miss him. You wish you could talk with him about why he did what he did, but he’s not present to defend himself. It’s not surprising, then, that you have redirected your anger at others in his life. For a time, you blamed your son’s university and its uncompromising academic standards. As proficient as they may have been at pushing students to excel, why didn’t they offer some private, one-on-one support to a suffering student? Then you blamed his physician. Didn’t she know that bipolar disorders can prove deadly? Why didn’t she change his medication sooner, when she saw that what he was on wasn’t working? By the time she finally did change his prescription, it was too late. His condition had spiraled downward to the point of no return.

You and your wife have even turned on each other. Rather than drawing her to you and trying to comfort her in your shared grief, you’ve blamed your wife for the needless stress she imposed upon your son. She was always the first in line to sign him up for every imaginable project at school and in the community. Was it to ensure time for her own selfish pursuits? Or was it

simply to push him to be the perfect student, the perfect son? Surely she could see that pressures were building and that he wasn't coping! Unfortunately, blaming your wife hasn't lessened your grief. It's only led to talks of separation and possible divorce.

Your anger isn't only directed at those who may have contributed to your son's death. It's also aimed at those whose response to that death has been guided more by stigma than by compassion. Why haven't people defended you against the ugly gossip that continues to denigrate your family? Why have they been so naïve and insensitive? Before long, you're feeling angry not only at those who would dare besmirch your loved one (even just in their own minds), but also at those who permit the cuts and smears to stand. You feel wounded every time someone new asks you what happened and why. You'd like to answer, "How should I know? Don't you think I'd have moved heaven and earth to prevent this?" Would you ask me 'why' if he had died from a brain aneurism or in a car accident? Why don't you ask God why?"

Even those who keep quiet about the suicide seem worthy of your anger. You feel betrayed by friends and family members who haven't found time to stop by to express their sympathy and support. Don't they realize that their silence speaks with the same clarity as those who openly judge the suicide?

Angry and alone

When people you love and respect disappoint you — as inevitably happens before and after a suicide — you very naturally feel that you have a right to be angry. The question is: What does your anger accomplish? Perhaps you remember having been so mad that the only way you knew how to deal with your anger was to kick or break something or simply stomp out of

⁷ Rita Robinson, *Survivors of Suicide* (Franklin Lakes: The Career Press, Inc., 2001), 26.

a room. For a brief instant you may have felt relief. Your stress had lessened. However, if your explosion is like most, it did not improve matters. It wasn't constructive in any way. It may even have made things worse.

When we hurt, we must deal with our emotions constructively. We otherwise will hurt those we love. Unless we look to our family for support and strength, in fact, we're sure to push one another away. It's true when you point your finger at others, you temporarily divert blame away from the deceased and yourself. However, you end up pushing others away and standing alone, relying on only yourself for encouragement and comfort.

Even if you have not permitted your anger to alienate family or friends — you've had no emotional outbursts, made no scene that might backfire and cause you embarrassment — you may still have nurtured your private anger. It's given you clarity and this clarity has helped you draw some calming conclusions: So-and-so was overbearing, dismissive, preoccupied, uncaring. Yet even this well-behaved anger leaves you all alone. Raging in silence has done nothing to lessen the grief.

Beating yourself up

In his last months, your son was so angry at himself, feeling like such a failure. "But who's the real failure?" you keep asking. You failed to foresee how bad things might get. You failed to offer the right kinds of Christian encouragement. And now, it's too late.

You can't forget what you might have done. If you had only known what he was going through — how tormented and agitated he was! If you had only paid more attention to the signs that he was depressed and tried harder to help! If you had only spoken with him more openly about the pressures he was facing at school! Was he liking his teachers any better? Was he making new friends? How was his job on campus?

Dealing with your guilt may be especially trying as you imagine others expressing similar regrets about you. “If only his father had taken the same interest in his son’s health as he did in his own career! If only he had been a little more in touch, a little more empathetic! Couldn’t he see what was going on?”

Blaming others is one way to channel the anger you feel after your loss. Guilt — blame directed inward towards yourself — is another. In fact, it is arguably the most common form of blame relating to a suicide. It’s private; it’s convenient. You can beat yourself up as often and as thoroughly as you like, and there’s no one (or so you let yourself believe) who will suffer by it but you yourself. Who will even notice when, instead of targeting someone else with your anger, you take aim at yourself?

The motivation behind lashing out in anger at others and wallowing in personal guilt is the same: You wish to protect your loved one, deflecting blame away from them. Regrettably, the result of both blame and guilt is the same. You’re not grieving in a healthy or beneficial way. Rather than reacting to your loss, you’re reacting to the suicide. Rather than fighting the good fight, you’re simply beating yourself up. Such a course of action can only leave you more bruised and broken, not less.

Another reason you’re feeling such great guilt, possibly, is because you’re experiencing great relief. A tremendous burden has been removed. Living with someone who’s clinically depressed can be very challenging. And living with one who is suicidal can prove overwhelming. Nevertheless, you think, “I shouldn’t be feeling relief! My son is dead! I should be feeling guiltier than ever!” Presumably it’s an expression of your love and loss. You let him down, after all. Even so, where has this logic gotten you? Your guilt perpetuates as you seek to assure others, or more likely yourself, that never again will your love fail him.

You feel relief because a weight has been removed from you — and not just you. Your *son* is also feeling relief. Both of you have been delivered from the overwhelming burden of his depression.

But you question whether that *should* offer you relief. After all, you don't deserve to have your burden removed, and even if you did, suicide would still never be the right way to go about it.

Laying your sins on Jesus

Are you struggling to shake the conviction that you contributed to your loved one's sense of desperation? Are you wracked with guilt over what you perceive as your role in his death? Instead of obsessing over your sin, confess your sin. You do not have to tell the world. But you may certainly tell other members of your family. You may confess your sins in the Divine Service and receive absolution. In the Lord's Supper, you may receive Christ's body and blood given and shed for you.

If you are plagued by relentless guilt, you may also benefit from seeking out private confession and absolution from your pastor. This time-honored practice is intended to "comfort and strengthen the faith of those who have great burdens of conscience or are sorrowful and distressed."⁸

However you choose to confess your sins before God, settle for nothing less afterward than the unequivocal assurance that Christ has taken your guilt upon Himself. "For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ," St. Paul assures us. "Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing" (1 THESS. 5:9,11).

Why didn't God ...?

After your shock wore off and you began to grasp the ultimate futility of blaming others for your son's death, the focus of your anger turned from your family and friends to God. Your prayers

⁸ "Individual Confession and Absolution" in *Lutheran Service Book* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 293.

(when you even can pray) have become full of questions and accusations:

“Why did You bring our son into this world knowing that he would die in this way? Why grant Your blessing of life only to have it wiped out by mental illness and suicide? We tried to raise him according to Your will. We brought him to the font, taught him the Scriptures, encouraged him in his faith. Even in his darkest days, he attended church nearly every Sunday. What more could any of us have done? If You are all knowing and all powerful — if You really loved him — how could You let this happen? You saved him from sin. Why couldn’t You intervene and save him from suicide?”

What do you do when you discover you’re angry at God? What comes next after you find yourself crying out, “Was this Your will? Really? My son was a believer! He trusted You! You, alone, Lord, could have prevented him from losing hope! Why did You hide Your face?” When you find yourself up against Almighty God, there are only two possibilities. You turn away from Him, or you turn to His Word. And if you *do* turn toward His Word and not away, you’ll quickly discover a curious reality: You are not the first person to have experienced what you are now feeling towards God. Many in Scripture have uttered their cries of lament, complaining to God for their suffering and loss and asking, “Why?!”

Lamenting to God

We might view it as our opportunity to vent with God; we air our grief, hoping that it might bring us instant relief. To lament, strictly speaking, is to acknowledge that Someone is there — God our Creator, the One who is in control of all things — and to reveal to Him that you’re in need of some answers. Think of the words of Job: “Why have you made me your mark? Why have I become a burden to you?” (JOB 7:20). Scripture reveals Job to be “blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned

away from evil.” And yet it took merely one day for him to lose all 10 children, his entire livestock and nearly all his servants. A short time later he was afflicted with excruciating boils over his entire body.⁹ Was Job not suffering unjustly under God’s hand? Why? Was *this* God’s will? What gives?

Or remember the words of Mary and Martha, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died” (JOHN 11:21,32). These sisters mourned for their brother, Lazarus, whose death seemed to them so pointless, so unnecessary. Jesus was clearly the Lord, who knew all things and could heal every illness. And yet when they got word to Him that their brother was sick, He didn’t respond! He waited until Lazarus was in the tomb for four days, reeking of death! Why? Was *this* God’s will? What gives?

Or finally, recall the words of the Lord Jesus, Himself: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (MATT. 27:46). Jesus was the Father’s only-begotten Son, beloved from eternity. Had He been a sinner, His crucifixion would have been just. However, He was not receiving the due reward for His deeds. He had done nothing wrong! And yet He was abandoned by God, even as He accomplished His Father’s plan of salvation by suffering for the sins of the world. Why? Was *this* God’s will? What gives?

There are many from Scripture whose cries of lament seem to go unheard. And there are countless believers today who ask the same questions. “Why have You permitted me to suffer in this way? Was *this* Your will? But it makes no sense!” Understand that a prayer of lament isn’t necessarily an expression of unbelief. And it’s more than an expression of despair or anger, sorrow or anguish. It’s also a desperate plea for relief. The Christian is asking God for reassurance: “Despite what’s happened recently, despite what looms ahead, bless me, Lord, as You’ve promised!”

⁹ See Chapter 3 for a fuller discussion of this suffering saint.

Wrestling with God

So, will God finally answer? Reflect for a moment on the account of Jacob, who wrestled with the angel of the Lord through the night. After the Lord put Jacob's hip socket out of joint, Jacob still refused to quit: "I will not let you go unless you bless me," he said (GEN. 32:26). It's a bold, even brash demand, but it shows how deeply Jacob needed reassurance regarding God's will. The Lord had promised He would make Jacob's offspring as the sand of the sea, which could not be numbered. But Jacob was soon to meet his brother Esau, whom he feared would attack and destroy him. So, on the one hand was God's promise, and on the other was what seemed to be Jacob's impending doom. Facing this uncertainty, Jacob would strive against the Lord, he would prevail, and he would receive God's blessing.

It's what you and I may expect as we battle God's will. We need not fear to let our prayers be raw and honest. Jesus Himself prayed this way, and His prayers were pleasing to His Father. Even as you cry out, asserting that God's will regarding your sufferings makes no sense, His will regarding your blessings makes *absolute* sense. The Lord will bless you as one who has striven with Him and prevailed. Recall that during his fight Jacob saw the Lord's face. "I have seen God face to face" he declared, "and yet my life has been delivered" (GEN. 32:30). The same thing takes place today. The believer sees God's face at the very time he wrestles with Him. Despite the Lord's apparent silence, He appears to us in Christ and His Gospel. Like Jacob, therefore, you may refuse to take no for an answer, knowing your cry is never uttered in vain. For God has already promised to bestow His blessing. You may, in fact, tell God, "I'm not going to *let go* of Your Word, until You *bless* me through Your Word!" And He surely will. In the words of your Savior, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice. You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy" (JOHN 16:20). That's the Lord's promise even today. Even in your pain, God will stand with you and strengthen you with His grace.

Holy anger?

It's not a sin to be angry. The righteous wrath of our holy God is written all over the Scriptures. Jesus knew anger — He grew indignant at the disciples who tried to send away little children (MARK 10), lashed out at money changers who made God's temple into a "den of robbers" (MARK 11), and even cursed a fig tree that failed to bear fruit (MARK 11). "Be angry," Paul writes to the Ephesians, "and do not sin" (EPH. 4:26).

Although anger is not in itself sinful, however, we must direct it properly. Otherwise, we may permit the sun to go down on our anger (EPH. 4:26) and give the devil an opportunity to reap discord and destruction in our lives. To illustrate, think of a high-rise that has recently been condemned. Structurally, it is no longer a safe living-quarters. The apartments must therefore be demolished. So a date is set, the building is evacuated and the proper explosives are set in place. It is a controlled demolition and will be beneficial to the community, providing space for needed stores and businesses. If the same explosives ignite and the structure implodes when people are still in the building, however, the pile of rubble will be viewed very differently. It is nothing short of a tragedy. Similarly, when anger is utilized properly, the outcome is clearly constructive. When we use anger for our own purposes, however, the outcome is bound to be disastrous. In addition to hurting those whom we've promised to serve, we risk alienating those we love.

It is important, then, as you grieve your loss, to understand clearly what is the true source and cause of your anger. God's Word reveals who our real and common enemy is — and it isn't doctors or nurses, fathers or mothers, wives or husbands, culture or society. It isn't even ourselves, frail and finite though we may be, nor is it the God who died to save us. It is sin. Sin has been around since Adam and Eve disobeyed God and fell from grace in Eden. It is sin that leads to death — all death. Whether we perish from cancer, a car accident or suicide, sin

is the ultimate cause of death for every human being. Even if a loved one lives to a ripe old age and dies of natural causes, it is sin that kills them. We die because nothing good dwells in our flesh (ROM. 7:18). In every case, we may see death as “the wages of sin” (ROM. 6:23), which affect us all. Each and every one of us was conceived and born in sin and is sure to live and die a sinner.

It’s all right to be angry about this. It’s more than all right. It’s *right*. God also is angry over the presence of sin and death in His good creation. The prophet Isaiah describes God’s anger over sin as a cup full to the brim of wrath (IS. 51). Yet he also promises relief for those under the curse of sin and death:

Therefore hear this, you who are afflicted,
who are drunk, but not with wine:

Thus says your Lord, the Lord,
your God who pleads the cause of his people:

“Behold, I have taken from your hand the cup of staggering;
the bowl of my wrath you shall drink no more.”

(IS. 51: 21-22)

It is this cup of God’s wrath that Christ drained on the cross. Having consented to drink of the cup, Jesus would pray in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night before His death: “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will” (MATT. 26:39). Sin may wreak havoc on our earthly lives and bring us to the grave — we can be rightly angry about that — but we need not fear the all-consuming anger of God, now or ever.

Trusting this, you may lash out in anger and grief against the scourge of death all you like. But know that it’s always best to do so with fellow believers gathered around God’s Word. Together in the church we defy our common enemy, death, and assure one another that our final day is not a final defeat. Together we lean on our Savior Jesus, who conquered sin and death by dying our death for us. Doing so, we find that, even after the tragedy of

suicide, we have something to offer one another besides anger: consolation. Clinging to the promises of Christ, we can “rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep” (ROM. 12:15).

Christ has suffered and died for us, removing from God’s sight every sin that would prevent us from standing before Him as righteous and precious in His sight. Yes, “the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (ROM. 6:23).

The right scapegoat

The idea of a scapegoat goes far back in the Old Testament to the book of Leviticus. There we read that, on the Day of Atonement, a live goat was to be brought to the high priest. Laying his two hands on its head, he would confess over it the sins of the Israelites. The people’s sins subsequently were transferred to the goat’s head. Bearing the people’s sins, the animal was then sent away into the wilderness (LEV. 16:20-22). As surely as the goat became lost to the people, the people’s sins became lost to their Lord.

While this ancient annual ritual was long ago abandoned, the hapless scapegoat has lingered in the imagination ever since. In today’s manner of speaking, a scapegoat is anyone who receives blame for another person’s misdeeds or mistakes.

Following a suicide, it is common for survivors to look for a scapegoat to take the blame. This scapegoat may turn out to be the surviving husband or wife, the father or mother — anyone who spent time with the departed or was bound up in his or her suffering in some way. As the scapegoat, this person becomes the focal point of anger for those who mourn. Surely (the thinking goes) there was something he or she might have done to prevent this catastrophe and spare everyone their consequent grief. If only you could lay all the blame for the suicide squarely on their head and cast them out into the wilderness, perhaps you could find some measure of relief for your own guilt and pain.

If you have targeted someone as your scapegoat in this way, beware: You've allowed your anger to serve evil rather than good. You've determined it would be better that this other person be judged and punished for the suicide than your departed loved one. But to look for a human scapegoat to take our guilt away is to overlook the perfect scapegoat God has already provided for us: Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Had God chosen, He could have made each of us our own scapegoat, eternally condemning every one of us and casting us out of His presence into the barren wilderness of sin. But "God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him" (JOHN 3:17). Jesus came to us not to *mark* us as sinners but to *die* for us sinners, not to stigmatize us as murderers, thieves and adulterers, but that He might Himself be stigmatized, bearing our sins on the cross where He would be cursed in our place. God in His compassion elected His Son to receive all our blame. In the words of the prophet, "And the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (IS. 53:6).

As you seek help in your grieving and learn to deal with your loss, reflect on the right scapegoat: God's scapegoat. Christ bears our guilt into the wilderness where it can trouble us no more. Behold God's Lamb, Jesus Christ, that you may "be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you" (EPH. 4:32).

Gospel for the grieving

To know God is to know that God is love. He desires only what is good and beneficial for us, and He delivers. He gives us our daily bread and sustains us in our Christian faith through His Word. It is why we know better than to blame God if things don't go as we would hope and someone dies. It's not the Lord's fault. "The wages of *sin* is death" (ROM. 6:23, emphasis added).

The most important question, therefore, is not how God could permit your son to struggle with mental illness and hopelessness. The real mystery is how God could love the sinner, even die for the sinner, *at all*. And you know the answer to that. Would the Lord save us, even when we were prone to doubt His grace and fight temptation less than satisfactorily? Would Jesus reach out to us when we are sinking and take hold of us by the hand? The answer is yes! We may not know everything regarding God's will, namely why *your* son would die. But this we do know: why *His* Son would die. "For God so loved *the world*, that he gave his only Son, that *whoever* believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (JOHN 3:16, emphasis added). God doesn't need us to make excuses for Him. Rather than justifying Himself, our Father chose to justify you and me and the suicide and every other sinner through the blood of Jesus Christ our Savior.

Whether the guilt you feel at your son's death is false or warranted, there is only one truth that's sure to ease your conscience. Although *you* could not save him, *Jesus* could and did. Your Savior offered up His life as ransom for both your sin and the sin of your son. He is the atoning sacrifice, as it is, not for our sins only, "but also for the sins of the whole world" (1 JOHN 2:2).

Let this truth set your conscience at peace: God is the One who forgives. You don't need to make yourself the target of blame; you needn't find someone else to be the target, either. The Lord became the target for you. Rather than looking back at what you *might* have done, look back at what Christ most certainly *did* do. He died on the cross to pay for your sin. Look and behold, "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (JOHN 1:29). The very sin that's as evident as day is the sin that's taken away.

Giving way to anger, blame and guilt does not take away the pain and loss I feel after suicide. I am comforted only in the

knowledge that Christ bears all my guilt — and my loved one's guilt, too — in His body on the cross. Letting go of my own anger and offering God's forgiveness to those around me, *I will grieve for the suicide.*

ROUND 3: FANCY FOOTWORK

Seeking Answers in Psychology

THE THIRD ROUND IN MY FIGHT *against grief after my wife's suicide came as the red haze of anger began to lift. I had lashed out — if not out loud, certainly in my mind — against family members, health care providers, society at large, my own self and even God. Curiously, though, I could never bring myself to blame Jean. When it came to the role she had played in her own suicide, I continued to dance and dodge around the metaphorical boxing ring. I practiced whatever fancy footwork was required to shield her from any real blame for her own death. It seemed crucial to me that she remain innocent of any wrongdoing.*

Even so, I found I could sustain an offensive position for only so long. I refused to acknowledge defeat, but I began to go on the defensive. I looked for answers that could make rational sense of the tragedy that had taken place in my life. I believed I could escape my sense of loss only if I came to understand how she died from a psychological point of view. I hoped that if I could only excuse my wife's condition and explain to people why she had lost hope, I could deal with my grief.

So I dug into the science of mental illness, seeking a satisfactory medical explanation for Jean's suffering and death. Her fatal loss of hope, my research reassured me, was a complication of her illness. It was her medications that had failed — not her. Each prescription had worked for a time. I remember one time specifically when Jean started feeling she was on top of the world. She wanted to start teaching again part time at the Lutheran school where she previously had subbed. She also talked about having another child, even believing at one point that she might be expecting again.

Unfortunately, in every instance, her depression would return, stronger and with more devastating symptoms. She began to obsess over her troubles. It became increasingly evident to her that if she couldn't fix how she was feeling, neither could she fix how she was functioning as a wife and mother. Eventually, after having her medication altered several times, Jean became convinced that nothing would work. Death, she came to believe, was the only cure for her affliction.

In the weeks and months before she left us, Jean no longer shared her thoughts with me, and I could never really be sure what she was thinking. I do know, however, that she was more than somewhat concerned about our children. She was downright afraid for them. Jean's psychologist asked her at one point whether she had thoughts of hurting the children. When she answered "yes," I realized how in the dark she had kept me. Before that, it had not occurred to me exactly how much pain she was in. I hadn't imagined the struggle she endured just to put on a good face and maintain a vague semblance of normalcy within our family life. It became clear to me later, as I struggled to understand the psychology of her illness, that her fears for

our children's safety and wellbeing had played a large role in driving her to do what she did.

But would it really help me to know this? I could read and ponder the insights of secular psychology within the context of my loss. I could feel lightbulb after lightbulb of recognition go on in my own head. Yet I knew deep down that I was still only dancing around the true source of my anguish. I had not sought peace in my grief where peace may be found — in the redeeming love of our only Savior. I was still preoccupied with asking, "How I can I justify her actions?"

Grieving for your teenage daughter

It was difficult enough when you heard the thoughts expressed by your grandmother as she was dying of cancer. She just wanted to go home to the Lord. It was her daily prayer. Today you're reflecting on the words of your teenage daughter who battled major depression. Suffering from unbearable psychological pain, she was preoccupied with dying and talked about it often. Despite clinical interventions, her insidious disease refused to release her.

"I'm not sure how much longer I can stand this!" she told you. "I can't bear to see how my life is hurting those I love!" A couple days later her depression convinced her it was time to end her pain by ending her life. Since then, your pain has only deepened. You're thinking, "Perhaps if I come to understand something about her suffering it will help relieve my sorrow. If only I understand her mental illness, I can make sense of her death."

A cancer of the mind

Public ignorance around mental illness runs rampant, but as you begin to peel back the layers, a horrific reality sinks in. What is it like to live with clinical depression, bipolar disorder,

post-traumatic stress disorder, schizophrenia and other diseases of the mind?

The agony of severe mental illness is a pain few can comprehend. All the things that make life worth living — joy, peace, hope, meaning, purpose, satisfaction, even physical pleasure — seem forever out of reach. In their place is a sense of utter hopelessness that feels as though it will never subside, not even remotely. It is true that modern treatment options — usually a mix of psychotropic mood-altering drugs and cognitive-behavioral therapy — have brought a measure of relief to many. However, they by no means offer a guaranteed cure.

Read enough of the literature, and you'll come to the realization that depression and other mental illnesses behave less like a bacterial infection (which can be knocked out once and for all by a heavy round of antibiotics) and more like cancer. Think through the parallels for a moment: For a time, you hope the cancer may be overcome with the proper treatment. The right chemotherapy, surgery, radiation treatment or hormone therapy can successfully immobilize the attack on a given organ or tissues of the body. And for a time, these treatments seem to work. Some may even experience complete long-term remission and “beat cancer!” Unfortunately, in too many cases, although the cancer may disappear for a time, it is never truly “beat.” Sooner or later, it reappears in an even more devastating form than before, requiring more and more aggressive treatments and often leading to death in spite of these.

For many experiencing severe mental illness, this sequence of events feels all too familiar. At first, when they begin a new course of treatment, their depression is well managed. Their sense of desperation subsides. Their life and health return. But then, like the cancer which slowly eats away at the flesh, depression begins to eat away at their sense of well-being. The treatments that worked so well before may not do anything to touch it now. Different medications, higher doses, more frequent

therapy sessions — all fail to bring relief. Refusing to die, the invisible but ominous disease devours the inner self. No longer are they capable of looking optimistically at the life before them. Everything that holds meaning is consumed by twisted thinking. They find no value or confidence or pleasure in life. There is only loss and regret and the pain of hopelessness. They begin to realize that there will be no way out of this upside-down world — except death. It is by the grace of God that this does not happen to all suffering from severe mental illness.

The pain of hopelessness

When your daughter first suffered from hopelessness and thoughts of suicide, her depression did not pose the same threat to her life that it did later. She was in pain. But she would not act on it. Neither did she speak of dying. She had nothing to say at all. She fantasized about death, but she had not yet thought seriously of how she might actually end her life. Even if she had, she would not have had the capacity to follow through. One day she was taken to Urgent Care after a nasty rash had broken out on her face. Unlike many patients, who might be tempted to scratch the blisters, she remained motionless, staring off into the distance. She wasn't even aware of her condition. Refusing to be deterred, you tried to engage her in conversation. Perhaps if you distracted her for just a moment, you could offer her temporary relief. "God loves you! He doesn't want you to feel so sad!" you told her. Regrettably, the only response you received was a forlorn look of vacancy. Her hopelessness had burrowed so deeply into her mind and consciousness that she was already incapable of letting you in. She didn't hear a word you said. The pain was too intense.

Ironically, the day your daughter's depression lifted slightly, her risk for suicide increased dramatically. Her pain diminished just enough that she could concentrate on something other than her pain: how to escape it once and for all. Defenseless under

the pain of hopelessness, powerless to look on the bright side of things, she just wanted to die. And in due course she got her wish. Looking back, you're not thinking so much of what might have caused your daughter's hopelessness. You're musing over the fact that nothing could be done to reverse her condition.

Psychologists suggest that a common trait among the dying is hope. Even among terminally ill patients who are accepting of death, one typically leaves the door open a crack at least to the possibility of a cure. For your daughter, however, the one constant was the *lack* of hope. That for which she yearned more than anything — getting her life back — she was convinced was out of reach. Her greatest longing would never be satisfied. Having lost everything of value in life, she had nothing left but her thoughts, and what good were they? Her thoughts only hurt, and would apparently never stop hurting. She was drowning in hopelessness. It is of little wonder that she gave little or no thought to the grief her suicide would bring upon you, the surviving family members. Her only imaginable focus was fleeing the pain. Given this dreadful reality, is it any wonder that she sought the only relief she thought possible? Yet why, if death was the only cure for her mental illness, does her suicide still feel so wrong — so *evil*?

A silent killer

You knew that your daughter was sick and in pain. You knew that she was suffering from suicidal thoughts. Even so, her death by suicide came as a complete surprise. You had thought she was getting better. What went wrong?

Psychologists will assure you there were likely two very good reasons why you didn't see it coming. First, individuals suffering from mental illness often elect to keep their feelings private. They are ashamed of what they're feeling, and they don't want their feelings to be a burden to others. Because of this, even the most trained professionals often miss indicators of a potential

suicide attempt; they were fooled into believing the subject was doing better and could be trusted. Secondly, even if you knew fully what your daughter had in mind, it isn't realistic to believe you could have anticipated whether or when or how she would actually attempt to end her life. It is simply impossible to predict how the desperate will act when they see no other way out. Suicidal persons may be troubled, but that doesn't mean they aren't intelligent. They know what to say and do to get others to let down their guards and provide them the opportunities they need to follow through with their intentions. Even if you could have anticipated correctly the particulars of one suicide attempt, who is to say that you would have been equally successful the next time? The subsequent attempt may consist of a whole new set of conditions and events that trigger the desire to end life. You undoubtedly would have done *anything* to save her. But you could not do *everything*.

Did she really want to die?

By far the most common question asked following a family suicide is “why?” The next most common question is just as haunting: “Did she really want to die?!” For both questions, a comprehensive answer is often unobtainable. There are, in my opinion, however — in addition to a common denominator, which is hopelessness — three possible components commonly underlying a suicide or a suicide attempt.

'I can't live like this!'

But did she really *want* to die? Deep down, maybe not. Many people with major depression attempt suicide not to end it all but as a desperate and unmistakable attempt to get rid of their anguish. It's possible, then, that your daughter did not truly wish to die. More than anything, she wished to be relieved of living. Perhaps, more than death, she was seeking relief. The question continued to stalk her: “Can anything end this misery

of mine?” As long as that question remained unanswered, it was literally threatening her life, wearing away at her until she finally convinced herself, “I can’t live like this!” The only option left, in her opinion, was to commit an extremely drastic act — one sure to get her life off its current track. Yes, her decision to overdose on sleeping pills cost her life, but by choosing a means of death that *might* prove unlethal, she may actually have been leaving the door open a crack to be saved and finally receive some assistance.

“But wasn’t there a better way of obtaining relief?” you ask.

“Why not just talk to us? We were her parents! Didn’t she trust us enough to listen to what was troubling her?” The truth is that she had lost hope that your help could truly help her. Recall the rhetorical question your daughter put forward prior to her first suicide attempt: “What difference does anything make?” What did she mean by that? Plainly, both living and dying were a lose-lose situation as far as she was concerned. If she lived, she’d live in perpetual misery as the pain of unrelenting hopelessness persisted. If she died, she’d sin and devastate the lives of her loved ones. Given this catch-22, it didn’t seem to matter whether she lived or died.

But did she really want to kill herself? For most youths and many adults, psychologists tell us the decision to go through with a suicide attempt marks a last-ditch effort to regain control. Deep down they *don’t* want to die. To the contrary: They’re hoping to reclaim their life. The one contemplating death may not truly desire that her life be *over*. She wants her life *back*! But in order for that to happen, something big has got to change.

As far as many would-be suicides are concerned, what faces them isn’t a choice between living and dying. It’s a choice between living with unremitting pain and terminating that pain, no matter what it takes. In a sense, by attempting suicide, they’re trying to reboot their lives. Recall your issues with that old computer. At the most inopportune moment imaginable, it

would freeze up. Your only chance of continuing was if you hit those dreaded three keys: Ctrl+Alt+Delete. “No. I mustn’t! I may *lose* all my work! ... Yes, I must! It’s the only chance I have of *retrieving* my work!” As unreasonable as it may seem to you and me, a similar choice confronts the person overcome by clinical hopelessness. If she dies, the intolerable anguish will end. If she doesn’t die, at least something big will have changed.

‘Stop the pain!’

Did she really want to kill herself? In some instances, the answer is *no*. In other cases, the answer is *yes*. The second time your daughter attempted suicide, the only thing on her mind was ending what she perceived as her everlasting misery. She was 100 percent convinced everything was hopeless. Her life could never be fixed! She had reached this conclusion some time following her first suicide attempt. Now she lost hope, believing nothing would ever change. She saw not the slightest chance she could fix the life she had known with her family and friends. It’s why she chose a method of suicide she regarded as foolproof. There was simply no going back for her. She may not have said it out loud, but she was thinking it: “I’m beyond all help! I give up! I just want the pain to stop! I can’t tolerate it anymore!” And stop the pain she did.

Perhaps you’ll contend: “She had held on this long. Why not hold on a little longer? Why not continue to seek help?” Very simply, she was convinced there was no hope of ending her pain outside of ending her life. There was no rebooting her life, for there was nothing salvageable in her life.

This may strike healthy people as utterly irrational, but to a person with mental illness, it may seem entirely rational and the only feasible reaction. Convinced they’re the only ones who can extinguish the pain, they do so. It may even seem to them a mere technicality. Life is nothing more than a source of ongoing

pain, and relief will only come, apparently, when that life has been snuffed out.

‘I won’t be your burden!’

So what if your daughter was unable to obtain any meaningful relief from her mental anguish? Couldn’t she still have stayed and lived with her burden out of love for you and everyone else who cared for her? Why did she have to take the selfish way out?

Yet what if, as those who study the psychology of suicide have noted, she was sacrificing her own life not out of selfishness, but to save others from sharing in the trauma of her mental illness? What if she was excruciatingly aware that her illness was causing others pain, or at least sincerely believed this to be the case? What if, instead of living as an ongoing burden to her family, she decided to end the agony — for their sakes?

You remember your boyhood scuffles with your older brother. You were just playing, but he had a point to make. So, you wrestled for a few moments, until he pinned you to the floor. Instantly, you were given a choice. You could lie there indefinitely, restrained and humiliated, or acknowledge defeat and go free. “I’m not letting you go until you say ‘uncle!’” your brother warned. To cry “uncle!” is to surrender to your opponent. But what if surrendering is not an option? Or what if you cry “uncle!” over and over again only to find yourself as trapped as ever?

The suicide of King Saul deserves mention. While this biblical narrative offers little comfort to anyone seeking Gospel reassurance after suicide, it does shed light on the psychological state of those who, like your daughter, consider suicide their only option. The Israelites — under the leadership of Saul — had engaged in a bitter battle against the Philistines. Three of Saul’s sons were killed. In time, Saul himself was critically wounded by archers. Facing defeat, he saw only two possible outcomes: let himself be abused, humiliated, tortured, killed and desecrated by his enemies — or die by his own hand (1 SAM. 31:1–6). Saul

could see the handwriting on the wall. He had lost the battle. His life was over. But there would be no surrendering. There was an other option than dying a bad and violent death, in his opinion. Saul could die on his own terms and spare his people the humiliation of his being overcome by the enemy. At the end of the day, Saul would not cry out “uncle!” only to be violated by his enemy. Believing that he could commit evil for a good cause, he would die by his own hand “a good death.”

Saul is by no means the only one who, out of desperation, has justified taking his own life. We see versions of this story play out around us today, including in your daughter’s life. She was overcome by clinical depression. In her eyes, it was as clear as day that there was no way of winning this battle. Should she simply wait and let nature take its course? Should she surrender to her disease only to be incapacitated by it and become a burden to her family?! Submitting to her enemy would ensure only one outcome: being violated, becoming the subject of unremitting pity! Wouldn’t it ultimately be an act of kindness to save her loved ones from the ongoing pain of sharing in her struggle and die by her own hand?

You know all too plainly how your daughter ultimately answered these questions. From her perspective, there was no longer any hope for a happy ending to her mental anguish. Prolonging her battle seemed pointless. Either she would live in perpetual suffering and despair — and drag her beloved family down with her — or she would not live at all. In the note she left, you have no difficulty reading between the lines: “It isn’t that I *want* to die. I *have to* die! You can’t help me with *my* cross, but I can help you with *yours*!” Sacrificing herself, that was to say, would spare you the ongoing pain and humiliation of her disease.

Like Saul, in the end she saw only two options: torment for herself and others, or death. Rather than persisting in a fight that

she knew she couldn't win, she resolved to die "a good death" by her own hand.

The blessings of psychology

Your daughter's suicide, of course, did nothing to ease your burden, and, indeed, compounded pain with grief. Now you are left, moreover, trying to decide what you think about the entire science of mental health that tried and failed to help her.

Perhaps you are grateful for the way in which the insights of psychology have helped shed light on your loved one's illness and death. Perhaps you're not. Perhaps you even feel that, since mental health professionals were unable to save your loved one's life, you want nothing to do with them now or ever again.

Yet there is much these dedicated clinicians can do to help you and your family members as you work through your grief. When a loved one dies of cancer, you would not automatically turn your back on doctors, hospitals and medicine — nor should you when a loved one dies of suicide.

A good counselor can provide valuable support to you as you work through your sorrow, giving you a safe, stigma-free space in which to be completely open and honest about what you're going through. For children, who may be deeply vulnerable to and confused by the tragedy of suicide, professional therapy can be even more helpful.

One way among many in which mental health professionals can provide relief is by teaching you to distinguish between false guilt and warranted guilt. This is especially useful if you're trapped in an endless cycle of "what ifs," musing over what you might have done but didn't. If only you had found a safer place for your gun! If only you had *made* him continue his counseling! If only you had listened to his voice message sooner! He sounded so lost, so agitated! In cases like these, counselors can help you to accept the reality that you are not the one who

pulled the trigger, who administered the pills, who positioned the noose or the bag around his head.

The limits of psychology

Unfortunately, even the best mental health care can fall short in helping you truly grieve. In their efforts to console you, counselors must often rely exclusively on human and often strictly secular ways of thinking. They are therefore relatively powerless to help you acknowledge and deal with the spiritual side of your crisis.

The moment of truth may sound something like this:

It may be true (your counselor will acknowledge) that you inadvertently triggered distress in your daughter. Your actions or inactions may have caused her to feel vulnerable or isolated. But you didn't drive her to suicide. That was her choice alone. You should rest knowing that you did everything within your power to help — all that could possibly have been expected of you. You may clearly and calmly answer the haunting “what ifs” with the affirmation, “I did the best I could.”

But what if you *didn't* do all you could? (And since you are a finite, sinful human being, it's almost certain that you didn't.) When questions like this arise, your therapist's expertise can only go only so far in comforting you. It offers no true peace, for there is one painful truth that always remains: You failed to save your daughter. How do you forgive yourself, when your best was not good enough? What's more, how do you forgive *her*?

Death relief or Gospel relief?

Everyone may expect to bear both physical and emotional suffering, not only in life, but certainly in death. The question confronting those suffering under the crushing pain of hopelessness is, how do I obtain relief? What if there is no immediate or lasting relief in sight? What if death is the only apparent answer?

Our culture of death

Another serious weakness of a purely psychological understanding of suicide is that it threatens to make light of the seriousness of suicide itself. By rationalizing suicide and suicidal desires as complications of a purely clinical condition, in fact, it feeds into the culture of death that is so prevalent in our world today. The argument is simple and logical: Sometimes in cases of severe mental illness, the only possible relief is *death relief*, relief through dying. Prolonging the lives of those under such extreme distress is therefore neither compassionate nor ethical. By helping end life, on the other hand, one releases the tormented from their prison of pain. We see extreme cases of this ideology-in-action in places like the Netherlands, where medically assisted “psychiatric euthanasia” has now been legal for nearly two decades.¹⁰

The implications of this mindset for a grieving family are obvious. We are to consider the final days of the person’s life as having been comprised of nothing but suffering and torment. Her prognosis was clear-cut: uncontained misery with no hope of relief and no end in sight. But then her misery did end. She obtained relief through her self-inflicted death, the ultimate and only real cure for her chronic mental illness. Today’s death culture tries to comfort you by drawing your attention to one fact: Your daughter’s pain has ended. As tragic as her death might seem, the world tells you, she’s at peace! Her battle is over! She’s no longer in crisis, no longer struggling to see the end of the dark, foreboding tunnel — and neither are you. You’ll miss her terribly, but you can let her go knowing that death was the best thing for her.

¹⁰ Kirsten Evenblij, H. Roeline W. Pasman, Rosalie Pronk and Bregje D. Onwuteaka-Philipsen, “Euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide in patients suffering from psychiatric disorders: a cross-sectional study exploring the experiences of Dutch psychiatrists,” *BMC Psychiatry* 19, 74 (2019), [bmcp psychiatry.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12888-019-2053-3](https://doi.org/10.1186/s12888-019-2053-3).

As seductive as the message promoted by today's culture may be, it's a lie. Deep down in your bones, you know this. Death is never the best thing for us. It is always the enemy. Relief that's both genuine and enduring comes to us not through the *termination* of life but the *embracing* of life.

The problem of suffering

It's not surprising that the world fails to grasp this truth. Even God's saints have sometimes stumbled into the error of seeking "death relief." While Scripture doesn't record more than a handful of suicides, it does show us what it looks like when faithful individuals find themselves yearning for life's end.

Recall the prophet Job and his trials. Job was blameless and upright, fearing God and shunning evil. Yet the Lord allowed Satan to devastate Job's life, robbing him of everything dear to him. In the course of one day, the devil slaughtered all 10 of Job's children, his servants and his livestock. And the prophet's misery would not end there. Next Satan was allowed to afflict Job with painful boils from the soles of his feet to the top of his head (JOB 2:7).

Given these acute traumas, it's no surprise that Job's words sound familiar to those struggling with mental illness today: "For my sighing comes instead of my bread," Job laments, "and my groanings are poured out like water. . . . I am not at ease, nor am I quiet; I have no rest, but trouble comes" (JOB 3:24,26). And why did all this happen? God seemed silent and faraway, unwilling to answer Job's heartfelt prayers. The only words of encouragement Job would receive were from his misguided friends. Over and over again, they attempt to counsel Job: Surely there was some sin from his past that would explain God abandoning him. Job just needed to own up to it, and then surely relief would come. (Isn't that what we often tell people with depression even today? Surely there's something badly wrong in your life; if you can just fix what's causing you such misery, your

depression will go away!) But Job's friends were wrong, and he knew it. There were no such simple solutions to the problem of his suffering. And so, Job despaired.

Job did not commit suicide. When his wife urged him to “curse God and die” (JOB 2:9), he rejected her words and resisted the sin of self-harm. Yet even so, I'm pretty sure he fantasized about it. “What is my strength, that I should wait?” he bemoaned. “What is my end, that I should prolong my life?” (JOB 6:11 NET) He rued the day of his birth, wishing he had never been born. He yearned for death, wishing it would come sooner rather than later. It isn't difficult to empathize. Job's sores not only covered his entire body. They tarnished his entire life. He was loathsome and pathetic, one to be shunned, no longer of any value to the community. In his grief, loss and suffering, Job was the picture of death. In pain both outwardly and inwardly, he was utterly without hope. Practically speaking, his life was as good as over.

Job's lost hope and consequent pain connects very easily to the suffering endured by those living under depression's grip. They may not be suffering from sores covering every inch of their bodies. Nevertheless, their internal symptoms may prove equally debilitating. An acute sense of hopelessness disrupts their perception on every level. Everything they hold dear is tarnished. Like Job, they do not dread *dying* as much as they dread *living*.

The cure: The Gospel

Job yearned for death. His grief was so unrelenting that he saw no other chance for relief. “That God would be willing to crush me” he wailed, “that he would let loose his hand and kill me” (JOB 6:9 NET). If Job had lived today, psychologists would no doubt have written case studies and scholarly journal articles about him.

Yet it's worth noting that Job's human counselors — the mental health professionals of his day — led him only down blind alleys and dead ends. God rejected outright their futile attempts to

make rational sense of Job's suffering, saying, "My anger burns against you and against your two friends, for you have not spoken of me what is right" (JOB 42:7).

The only true cure for Job's grief came not from worldly wisdom but from the God of grace and His Gospel. Job found his peace at last not by rationalizing his suffering but by submitting to the will of a loving God whose mind was beyond his comprehension: "I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know," Job said (JOB 42:3). Although the Lord would first appear to him as a whirlwind, leading him to despise himself and repent in dust and ashes (JOB 42:6), Job would learn that God's love is as deep as His mind is inscrutable. True and lasting peace for Job came not from *psychology*, but from right *theology*.

Perhaps you can relate. All you can see are the bare facts regarding the death of your beloved daughter. She was like Job, covered in sores (psychological, if not physical) and bereft of everything that brought joy to her life. You wonder how genuine relief is even possible so long as you must confront in all its clarity the truth of her suicide. Your counselors try their best to help you focus on her actions rather than your own. They assure you that you weren't the one who caused her suicide. The choice was hers. Shifting the responsibility back to your daughter, however, is not ultimately what will take your guilt away. It certainly cannot take *hers* away — and her guilt troubles you no less than your own. What you need most in this time of grief, consequently, isn't a psychologist, but a Savior. One who knows what it is to suffer — and to take suffering away. One whose blood is strong enough — and whose love is big enough — to conquer death and cover the guilt of the whole world. You need the Gospel!

Job recognized this even in the midst of his unspeakable pain. In the face of God's silence, his friends' allegations and the bleeding blisters covering his body, the prophet cleared the air as he professed his faith in the Gospel and his only means

of relief: “For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God” (JOB 19:25-26). The tunnel was long, but he could see the light at the end of it. Even if death claimed him, he would be raised again and stand before his Lord, vindicated.

Gospel for the grieving

Gospel relief is Gospel intended for the grieving. Even as we acknowledge the medical realities behind mental illness and suicide, we remember, too, that Jesus Christ is our Great Physician. He spent His earthly ministry caring for and healing the sick and the demon-possessed, even raising the dead. In this, He shows us who God is: the compassionate Lord of Life and the only source of lasting relief for physical and spiritual suffering and death.

“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (MATT. 11:28), your daughter heard Him say, and, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (MATT. 5:3). Contrary to popular opinion, contrary to her own thinking, she has received relief not through her death but by Christ’s death on the cross. She is like Job. Despite her agony, despite the inability of others to truly understand, God holds her in His love, forgiving her for Christ’s sake and allowing her to confess with Job:

Oh that my words were written!

Oh that they were inscribed in a book!

Oh that with an iron pen and lead
they were engraved in the rock forever!

For I know that my Redeemer lives,
and at the last he will stand upon the earth.

And after my skin has been thus destroyed,
yet in my flesh I shall see God. (JOB 19:23-26)

It's the same relief your Savior intends for you this day. You may grieve this day not by embracing death but by delighting in the Lord's gift of life. For that's where you find relief, not by receiving a satisfactory explanation of your daughter's monstrous psychological pain, not by realizing how she's finally been freed of her disease. The Lord gave your daughter her life and He alone has preserved it, through the saving waters of Baptism, the Good News of Jesus Christ and Him crucified, and the Sacrament of His body and His blood. And He will sustain that same life in you. Genuine relief is yours when you hear this Good News. Your loved one has forever been freed of her sin and healed of all her afflictions. She lives this very day with her Savior and forevermore!

I will give thanks for the science of psychology even as I acknowledge its limitations. Seeking true comfort not in worldly wisdom but in the cross of Christ alone, *I will grieve for the suicide.*

ROUND 4: AGAINST THE ROPES

Confronting the Sin of Suicide

TO GRIEVE AS A BELIEVER *is to fight unrelentingly the good fight. Clinging steadfastly to our Christian hope, in Christ, we will obtain the crown of righteousness awarded on the last day. Despite our sorrow, we anticipate with joy seeing our Savior and those who have preceded us in the faith. Yet what happens when the fight drags on and on, round after round — when our adrenaline is long gone, our rage is spent and our defenses are battered? We can find ourselves pinned against the ropes, defenseless against the deep, eternal questions that are at the heart of what makes grieving a suicide so excruciating. Our only means of avoiding that knockout punch, it would seem, is to place our fists in front of our face in a desperate attempt to protect ourselves. Sure, we can put on a brave face and defend our loved one's actions to the world. But can we say with confidence that those who have died by suicide will be in heaven with us?*

When I first met Jean, she was an extremely happy young woman who loved life unlike anyone I knew. This continued for the first several years of our marriage. Then something happened. But it was slow and gradual and very subtle. Over the course of a couple years, her depression robbed her of her warm and cheerful disposition, leaving in its

place sadness and shame, paranoia and hopelessness. Finally, one day I made an unhappy discovery: Jean wasn't simply having another bad day. She was always miserable. Offering her encouragement had become impossible. Nothing I said could redirect her thoughts and nudge her back to her former disposition: not my desire to talk theology with her (which she had always before welcomed), not reading Scripture or praying together, not even attending Sunday's service, which previously had been the high point of her week.

Jean sat respectfully when I held devotions with the children. But when I spoke of the many blessings our family had received over the years, she just stared off into space. Even if I attempted to initiate some form of eye contact, all I got was a vacant expression, as though to say, "I don't deserve such encouragement. Jesus hasn't anything to say to me!" I was unaware of it at the time, but Jean was suffering from full-blown despair.

Remembering moments like this, I still struggled to find peace and overcome the stigma surrounding Jean's suicide even after my initial shock and anger at Jean's death subsided and my quest to find answers in psychology had ended. The very Gospel I knew as my only comfort presented me with the greatest obstacle: Jean was a Christian, but her last act on earth was a grievous sin, one that revealed a failure to trust in God through every trial. The theological paradox left me thoroughly exasperated. Surely Jesus could save her in spite of her suicide. But how? Meanwhile, I wanted to confront those — anyone who might listen — who were fixed on Jean's sin rather than her hope as a believer. I had some words to share. "You're right! Presumably, I shouldn't have to be grieving right now. But I am, for my wife has died. So, let me grieve as you have grieved for loved ones who've preceded you

in the faith! Let me rejoice even in my sorrow that my wife is in heaven with her Savior!"

That Jean was a Christian was evident to everyone who knew her — not only by the facts of her Baptism, her regular reception of the Lord's Supper, and her dedicated service in the church, but by her words and actions. The teachings of her Savior brought her joy and pleasure, and she never turned down an opportunity to talk theology and confess her faith. It began in her youth. In her confirmation Bible she had written notes and underlined passages from cover to cover. And it continued into our marriage and family life. During the day Jean welcomed me bouncing off her my latest ideas for Bible class. At supper time we had our daily devotions and hymn singing. And at night our entire family would recite our bedtime prayers, before Jean sang the younger ones to sleep. Eventually, Jean would decide to homeschool the older children, out of a desire to pass along the teachings she had learned as a child.

Visit with Jean, and you'd quickly learn of her love for God and His Word. Hang out with her, and you'd observe her sacrificial, Christ-like spirit. Even when she was overcome with major depression — even when her condition made it doubtful that she herself could hear the sermon and left her convinced she was of no value even to God — she never once failed to get our children ready and off to church on Sunday. She desired to follow God's will for her family, and she was resolved to sacrifice herself for the good of others up until her dying breath. I am convinced, despite her distorted thinking, that even while dying, Jean was thinking of her family.

Jean's life spoke for itself. She was a believer! But I sensed it wasn't enough as far as others were concerned. Her suicide would cause many to doubt whether she died a

Christian. This doubt, I realized, was at the heart of suicide's stigma. It was the reason for my anger. It was why I had tried so hard in my quest for psychological insights to overcome the apparent contradiction of a Christian's suicide. It was what continued to fuel my grief — and what, at the same time, made it impossible for me to truly grieve. What might I say to help hurting people resolve these painful paradoxes of grace and sin, belief and despair?

Grieving for your husband with young children

You feel very alone in your grieving. On one side you're haunted by the false thinking of your beloved husband who committed suicide. "My life is no longer worth living!" he had said. "I'm no good at being a father to our children, or at supporting you as your husband! You would all just be better off without me!" On the other side you're troubled by the false thinking of those who seek to justify themselves by judging you. "There must have been something wrong with his family or, worse, something wrong with his *faith* that he should resort to this! He couldn't really be a believing Christian *and* commit suicide!"

Listening to the murmuring and the rumors, you might conclude you have no right to grieve at all. Other Christians who mourn seem so certain that their loved ones died in the faith and have been received into the glories of everlasting life. You long to grieve as they do. Christian grieving, after all, encompasses sorrow *and* joy. We sorrow recognizing that "the wages of sin is death," but we feel joy recognizing that "the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (ROM. 6:23). But how can you feel joy apart from an uncompromised assurance that your husband is in heaven?

The sin of suicide

“You shall not murder” (EX. 20:13). In your darkest moments, these words torment you. Your therapist has encouraged you to push such thoughts away, to think of your husband’s death primarily as a complication of his mental illness, but her words don’t comfort you. You’ve read the Scriptures — and so had your husband. He knew that his life was not his own and that he was “bought with a price” (1 COR. 6:20) — yet still he chose to murder himself.

In doing so, he broke faith with you, brought shame and dishonor to his father and mother, and ultimately failed in his last moments to “fear, love, and trust in God above all things” (Luther’s explanation of the First Commandment).

There was *nothing* good or holy about his suicide. By choosing to take his own life, your husband sinned, against God, and also against you, your children and everyone who loved him. There’s no glossing over this painful truth. You will have to confront it head on before you can truly grieve.

No chance for comfort?

For many centuries Christians have struggled in their grieving for suicides. Making matters worse until recently was the fact that little or no comfort was offered or made available to them by the church. Regardless of the family’s conviction that a loved one was a believer, there were simply too many strikes issued against the person who died by his own hand for pastors and theologians to declare their confidence about the eternal state of the suicide’s soul.

‘He had no time to repent!’

You’ve seen it in the war movies you and your husband used to watch together: soldiers kneeling to confess their sins and receive Holy Communion before a battle so that what might be

their last moments would be full of God's grace. You saw it, too, when your grandfather died of cancer. His pain was excruciating and unremitting, but this gave him all the more reason to speak of his hope in the life to come. "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us" (ROM. 8:18), he declared. Then, as the end drew near, came one last, blessed visit with his pastor, who offered a word of hope and comfort from the Gospel of John as the family gathered around, singing, praying, holding hands, smiling through their tears. His was a good death.

How different was your husband's passing. Feeling very little of anything during his final days, he kept, by and large, to himself. Like your grandfather, your husband had stopped coming to church, but unlike your grandfather, he seemed to have nothing to say about his Savior or his hope of heaven. He hardly spoke at all, in fact. He just lay in bed. Worst of all, when the end did come, he died in the very act of sinning — no final opportunity for Communion, no last word of hope and absolution. The emergency room doctor said his death was almost instantaneous. She meant to console you with those words — to reassure you that your husband did not suffer at the end — but her words have had the opposite effect. You want to believe that he had time and opportunity to repent of his suicide in the split seconds between when he pulled the trigger and when he lost consciousness, but the facts of his case won't allow it. In your grief, you wonder how long it takes to ask God for forgiveness.

'He committed the unforgivable sin!'¹¹

Grieving for the suicide in one sense is the same as grieving for any family member. Your grieving entails shock, anger and sadness. What is different when you grieve after suicide is the

¹¹ The only unforgivable sin is the sin against the Holy Spirit (Mark 3:29). This sin may be defined as "unyielding refusal to believe the Gospel and a rejection of the Holy Spirit's work to create faith in Jesus" (*Lutheran Study Bible*, p. 1661). This sin does not apply to the baptized, believing Christian who commits suicide.

knowledge of suicide's inherent *wrongness*. The reality of the sin involved obstructs the grieving process, demanding that you evaluate and judge the one for whom you are grieving. Did your husband truly trust that he could "do all things through him who strengthens me" (PHIL. 4:13)? Did he pray sufficiently in his time of trial "and lead me not into temptation"?

Prior to his suicide, you never doubted whether your husband was a Christian. Even when depression took hold and he was overcome by personality changes, feelings of worthlessness and a sense of utter and complete hopelessness, you knew — and he did, too, in his more lucid moments, at least — that it was his illness that was to blame for his despair, not his lack of faith.

"Jesus, help me!" he would pray. "I believe; Help my unbelief!" (MARK 9:24). You remember seeing him, pale and blank-eyed, murmur the Kyrie to himself, over and over: "Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy. Lord, have mercy."

Now, after his death, you're not so sure. You think back to those last, awful days and remember how you struggled to convince your husband to go with you to church. He should hear God's Word, you told him. It would help his outlook on life, to say nothing about his Christian faith. Typically, he was just not feeling up to it. You reminded him again and again that he was a wonderful husband and father and, most importantly, that he was God's child. But in the end, he refused to listen to your words of encouragement. Did he do the same when it came to the words of his Savior?

The images of your husband's hopelessness remain fresh in your memory. Once cheerful and fearless, he was by the end debilitated from top to bottom by the shroud of depression. Instead of bursting with self-assurance, he was drowning in self-loathing and shame. Your husband's funeral was a few weeks ago. A summary account of your troubling misfortune is now official. He was depressed, overwhelmed by the pressures of life. He

committed suicide. Did he, however, lose hope in God's salvation? Did he despair in such a way as to fall away from grace?

You know what others are thinking, and why they seem so scared to make eye contact when they see you at church. "Christians don't despair! They keep fighting! They hang in there to the bitter end! Could it be that he wasn't *really* a Christian?" Do they have a point? Despite all your analyzing, what can you say with confidence about his faith those final few days?

To fight the good fight (2 TIM. 4:7) is to live and confess the Christian faith in the face of the relentless assaults of the devil, the world and our own sinful nature. Your husband fought the good fight, but did he win ultimately? The way in which he died has left you filled with doubt. Christians who trust in Christ's salvation, who live by faith and in the joy of the Lord, should have no reason to despair. Does the fact that your husband *did* despair mark him as one forever outside of saving faith? In his first epistle, John wrote about an unforgivable "sin that leads to death" (1 JOHN 5:16). Is suicide that sin?

'God alone knows the heart'

You are not alone in your questions. Every Christian whose life has been touched by suicide has struggled with the same doubts. Many presume that we cannot know for sure whether a Christian who commits suicide has died in the faith, that we must wait until we see them in heaven (or don't) to know for sure, and that, for the time being, we can only venture our best guess, based on whatever evidence we can cobble together.

I once spoke with a woman whose sister had recently committed suicide. She and her family were desperate for Christian comfort. Since her pastor was out of town, she sought out the pastor who was filling in while he was away. "Is my sister in heaven?" she asked him, point blank. His answer: "I don't know."

Not so long ago, this was the standard response of a good many pastors, who felt they could offer no answer that was both truthful and reassuring in the absolute sense. They would simply say, “God knows the heart; we do not,” and leave it at that. The member who committed suicide could be likened to the long-time parishioner who died having not darkened the church door for several years prior. In both cases, pastors would place the matter squarely into God’s hands. His will be done. That was the bottom line. There was no message of cross and comfort — no way of feeling certain whether a beloved family member who had been a Christian his entire life prevailed against unbelief. “The Lord knows the contents of one’s heart. But He hasn’t revealed that to us.”

What comfort are words like these for those who mourn a loved one? No wonder so much sorrow and stigma accompany a suicide. Who wants to go near such a death?

We’re reminded of a boxing match where the judges cannot agree on a winner. We must settle for a split decision. In a sense, it’s left to the spectators to determine who the real winner is. This, unfortunately, is how many in the church continue to view a suicide. If it’s true (and I would emphatically disagree) that we cannot know what was in his heart, those standing on the sideline may decide whether he went to heaven. But how can we hope for an unbiased evaluation? All that people see as he exits the ring, after all, is the sin of suicide.

Christian doctrine: Your path to certainty

If there was no way for Christians to answer these doubts and uncertainties, the grief that comes after suicide might well be complete and unending, an abyss from which there was no escape. Thanks be to God that He gives us all the answers we need and more in His Holy Word!

Doctrine — a word meaning simply “a set of beliefs held and taught” — always serves a sacred purpose in Christ’s church.

Christian doctrine consists of Jesus' teachings which are found in God's Word. The doctrine of the Law accuses and confronts. Spoken to the arrogant and self-secure, it shows the individual his sin, leading him to repent. The doctrine of the Gospel, on the other hand, comforts and encourages. Spoken to the contrite and repentant, it shows the believer his Savior, reinforcing his faith. St. Paul no doubt had this in mind when writing Timothy. Under the apostle's mentoring, Timothy was exhorted to pay the closest attention to the Lord's doctrine, for by doing so he would save both himself and those who heard him (1 TIM. 4:16).

The words of the apostle are intended for you. You receive true and lasting comfort this day recognizing that your family member who preceded you was saved by the Lord's doctrine, that is, the teachings of His Gospel. When we apply sound doctrine to the thorny theological problems of suicide, in fact, you may be certain that your Christian husband is in heaven. We look especially at the nature of sin, death and repentance, the matter of God's timing, hope and despair, and the crucial question of how God saves us by His grace.

The sinful nature

How are you supposed to grieve, when the death of your husband feels so terribly wrong? He's dead because he sinned! You wish you could find a more conventional way of explaining his suicide, something that wasn't quite so tragic, so disturbing, so sinful.

Yet every one of us is sinful by nature. The Lord has this to say by His prophet, David: "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me" (PS. 51:5). We know this because of Adam's fall (ROM. 5:12): At the very moment we were conceived and became part of God's beautiful and perfect creation, that same creation of our Lord was contaminated. As a result, we are all born sinners. That means we all sin, 24/7, if not in each instant by our words and our actions, most certainly

by our thoughts and desires. Predictably, we cannot even recall most of our sins. “Who can discern his errors?” the psalmist inquires (PS. 19:12).

This is true even for Christians, who live out their days as both sinners and saints. Consider the words of the apostle Paul: “For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me” (ROM. 7:18-20).

It is important as we think about the sin of suicide to understand the important distinction between our sinful nature and our sinful life. Our sinful nature is the sin we’ve inherited. It consists of the fatal condition of the human heart that separates us from God and disorders all of our thinking and action. Our sinful life consists of every selfish and evil thought, word and deed that arise out of our sinful nature. Like the old “chicken-and-egg” conundrum, we can ask: Which came first? Our sinful nature or our sinful life? Thanks to the psalmist’s words above, we know the answer to this puzzle: “I was brought forth in iniquity.” We sin because we are sinners — not the other way around. And it is sin itself, not just individual sins, from which Christ died to save us. “The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance,” Paul writes, “that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners” (1 TIM. 1:15). Because of this, we need not make distinctions between big sins and small sins. Suicide is a sin. So is coveting (EX. 20:17). Sowing discord (PROV. 6:19). A lustful glance (MATT. 5:28). Hypocrisy and deceit (ACTS 5:1-3). All sins reveal the sinful state of our hearts. All separate us from the righteousness of God. Nevertheless, *all* have been fully atoned for by the death of Christ.

Committing the sin of suicide — or committing any sin, for that matter — did not *make* your husband a sinner. He sinned

because he was a sinner. That is sound Christian doctrine revealed to us in Holy Scripture. So is this: Christ died for sinners.

The wages of sin

Your husband died as a direct result of sin. This is true. Here's another truth that may help you in your grief: Your sainted grandfather suffering from cancer *also* died as a result of sin. What's more, *everyone who has ever died has died because of sin.*

"You may surely eat of every tree of the garden," God told our father Adam in the Garden of Eden, "but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die" (GEN. 2:16-17).

We all know the end of the story: Adam ate the forbidden fruit, and by so doing he brought sin into God's good creation. And even though he continued to live for many years after, his doom was sealed at the first bite. With sin, death entered the world, and Adam began to die.

Ever since, for Adam's descendants, death and sin have been inextricably joined together. "Sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned," Paul writes (ROM. 5:12). We are all sinners, and all sinners die. "The wages of sin is death" (ROM. 6:23).

True grieving after suicide comes in part when you can understand and acknowledge the true cause of every death: sin. Take heart, then, hearing the doctrine of God's Word. The Lord offers sure words of forgiveness and life to those — like you, like your husband — who are born in sin and doomed to die:

"God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us ... Therefore, as one trespass [Adam's] led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness [Christ's] leads to justification and life for all men ... so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through

righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (ROM. 5:8, 18, 21).

What does it mean to repent?

This is all well and good, you may say, for sinners who repent of their sins, but what about those who do not repent? Your husband, after all, committed a grave sin at the moment of his death. He had no opportunity to seek forgiveness after, even if his depression would have allowed him to do so.

This notion, however, that due to a matter of timing suicide must be an unforgivable sin is based on a faulty understanding of repentance. One maintains that the suicide, after committing a most reprehensible sin (terminating his own life), inasmuch as he’s no longer able to repent, is damned simply because time has run out.

True repentance is not about confessing our sins on a deadline. To repent, moreover, does not mean to confess and ask forgiveness for each individual sin, hoping that death will come before another sin has been committed. If genuine repentance depended on the timing of the act of confession and absolution, every Christian on earth ought rightly to be terrified about the danger of dying at the wrong time. What if you were to die not from suicide, but immediately after you had committed some other grievous and unfortunate sin? Would you go to heaven? What would we say if a Christian died of a sudden stroke? Would we question what was in his heart? Would we agonize over whether he had managed to repent in time? I think not. Not for a single instant would it occur to us that he might have abandoned the fight. We would say he died in the faith. After all, Jesus promises, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (JOHN 8:31–32). Those words are especially relevant to the believer in a time of trial. If you abide in God’s Word, the truth will not stop

working. Even in your deepest fears and despair, it will set you free from sin's curse.

To use another, starker example: Imagine you're driving on a mountain road during a snow storm. Suddenly, the car in front of you comes to an abrupt stop. You slam on your brakes, but, instead of slowing down, your car slips on an icy patch of the road. An instant later you're skidding off the side of the road and over a cliff. The drop is at least a hundred yards. In that final moment of sheer panic, instead of praying "Lord, have mercy!" you utter a word of blasphemous profanity. You sin, and a split second later you're killed. Will you go to hell? Inasmuch as you're unable to return to the Lord's Word and Sacraments and rightly conclude the good fight, one might label your death a "technical knockout" and consider you damned. One might. Or one might reflect on what it really means to repent. What does Scripture's doctrine reveal?

To repent is to turn away from sin — and not just *away* from sin but *toward* faith in Jesus and His forgiveness. Jesus said, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (LUKE 9:23). Repentance, then, is both about denying the sinful self *and* following Jesus. Note especially Christ's call to take up our cross "daily." Repentance isn't an isolated act. It's a way of life. As Luther put it in the first of his 95 Theses, "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent' (MATT. 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance."

What's more, repentance is itself a good gift of God. Only the Lord can uncover our many hidden faults, and only the Lord can declare us innocent of them. On our own, we are incapable of repentance. Think back to Luther's explanation of the Third Article of the Apostle's Creed (on the Holy Spirit): "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept

me in the true faith.” If repentance were left up to us, the sinner, to get right, we all would surely be lost. Thankfully, repentance is not our gift to God but God’s gift to us. “It is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure,” Paul informs us (PHIL. 2:13).

And why does God do all this for us? The Lord forgives not because we repent, not because we have done our level best to confess our sins and exhibit contrition in our hearts. He forgives us because Christ has redeemed us by His blood. What’s more, it is God’s love for us in Christ that instills in us the very desire to repent. To repent is to receive the Lord’s forgiveness and, by God’s grace, to live in His forgiveness. That is Scripture’s doctrine. As the Holy Spirit works the Gospel into our hearts, we turn our backs on sin. We leave it behind. We do not, however, leave behind our inclination to sin or our perpetual struggle with sin. That is why we pray that God generate in us on a daily basis a knowledge of our sin. May He give us through His Word true sorrow in our hearts and an understanding of what it means to repent.

When God forgives us, the spiritual consequences of our sin are removed from us “as far as the east is from the west” (PS. 103:12). The earthly consequences of that sin, however, may remain. An alcoholic’s liver doesn’t miraculously heal itself the moment he admits his idolatrous dependence and turns to God for forgiveness. The man who repents of committing murder does not expect to see his victim resurrected on account of his confession.

In the same way, there are severe consequences for someone who commits suicide. Because of their sin, they lose their life. It is misguided, however, to say that a Christian who dies in the act of sinning loses their *everlasting* life. In a theological sense, we all die sinners. There is no denying that your husband should have chosen to wait for God’s deliverance from his pain. What he chose instead was a sin that resulted in his death. You cannot defend his sin, but you can certainly defend his faith. The Bible’s

doctrine leaves you with no doubt. He believed in Jesus and clung to God's promise of salvation. Yes, he died *on account of* his sin. But Christ died *for* his sin. Yes, he died *a sinner*. But he also died *saved by God's grace*.

God's timetable

When your father died of a sudden and massive heart attack, you could not imagine life without him. Nonetheless, as a family you worked through your grief. Even if you could not understand God's will, you trusted the Lord's wisdom and accepted His judgement. It wasn't like your father *chose* to leave you. It was *God's* decision. *God's* timing. Today, though, confronted with your husband's suicide, you are not so sure you can make the same case. He rejected God's plan for him and ended his life according to his timeline, not God's. Or did he?

Here again you may trust God's Word and promises. "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny?" Jesus asked in the Sermon on the Mount. "And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered" (MATT. 10:28-30).

God was not blind and deaf to the events leading up to the death of your husband. His suicide did not surprise God.

Bear in mind God's words to His people, as they were recorded by Moses: "See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god beside me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal" (DEUT. 32:39). Even when it seems as though death may have been — even ought to have been — prevented, we must remember that its timing is always God's. "My times are in your hand," the Psalms confess, and again, "You return man to dust" (PS. 31:15; 90:3). All life is God's to give and God's to take away. Our sins of negligence or of stupidity or of hatred or even of self-harm are not more powerful than God's good and gracious will. To the contrary: His will is always done. The Lord receives the believer's soul at precisely the time He chooses. In every instance,

the Lord takes His children home according to His timetable, not ours.

We find great comfort in this fact. Yes, our time on this earth to benefit from God's Word will end one day. Our time to hear another sermon, read another Bible verse, receive encouragement from one more believer, receive again the Lord's body and blood, will expire. Yes, you would have liked more time with your husband. But it wasn't to be. Time ran out, just as time runs out on every believer.

But time did not run out on God. Consider again the timing of Christ's forgiveness. St. Paul declares, "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (ROM. 5:8). It's the nature of His grace. At the very time when God might have *condemned* us because of our sin, Jesus *paid* for our sins. He died in our place. By His grace — and at the very moment in time that God had appointed for Him — He shed His blood on the cross to pay the ransom for sin, denying sin of its power to condemn us. And by His grace He has saved your husband, not from suicide (though He surely could have, had it been His will to do so) but from something much worse: eternal death.

Hope, despair and God's grace

What about the sin of despair? That, after all, was your husband's true cause of death, even if it was never mentioned on any autopsy report. His suicide seemed almost a formality after despair had taken over his life.

Whether a Christian can despair depends on how you define the word. Most dictionaries define "despair" as hopelessness or the absence of hope. A despairing individual has come to believe that the things for which he yearns more than anything — purposefulness, care, relief, peace of mind — are forever beyond his reach. This general definition of despair, you might notice, is not necessarily spiritual in nature. When speaking broadly of

the word, then, we refer to a person's loss of hope. But what kind of hope?

To grieve for a Christian is to grieve for one who remained in God's grace. You find your comfort, then, in our Savior's doctrine of grace. It assures you that while your husband may have lost hope in this life, this is not the same as losing hope in the life to come. The apostle Paul declares, "If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied" (1 COR. 15:19 NIV). There is a difference between earthly hope and Christian hope. Hope *for this life only*, what we may term as *earthly hope*, centers on a world that's living on borrowed time. You hope for a better tomorrow, but nothing is a sure thing. If earthly hope is all we have, "we are of all people most to be pitied," and despair is our best, most sensible course of action. The believer, however, is never to be pitied, as we are privileged to embrace a greater hope: hope in Jesus Christ and the life to come. This superior and enduring hope we may term as *Christian hope*. It centers on Christ and the certainties of His everlasting kingdom. In brief, whereas human hope *hopes* for the best but is never sure of anything, Christian hope *anticipates* the best, certain it will come to pass.

We compare the two types of hope and quickly determine there's no contest. As optimistic as human hope may be, it is ultimately untrustworthy. Being only for this life, it has no lasting foundation. Focusing exclusively on the here and now, it is bound to deplete itself. In the end, in fact, if human hope is all we have, we are without hope entirely. This is the hope of the unbeliever, as the apostle affirms: "But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do *who have no hope*" (1 THESS. 4:13, *emphasis added*). Christian hope, on the other hand, is grounded upon the Lord's promise that Christ died so that we who believe in Him might never die. Consequently, Christian hope is sure to persevere, as it is directed to resurrection of our Savior and all

believers. In the simplest terms, whereas human hope is destined to die, Christian hope is certain to endure. Who or what can stop it? Christ bore in our place the penalty of our sin. He stripped sin of its power, so that sin has no say in our future. Only Jesus does. And what He wants for you, having removed all hopelessness, is a better tomorrow. An everlasting tomorrow.

This is why — as one who *does* have hope through the resurrection and everlasting life — you may grieve for the suicide. Although your husband lost hope in life, he did not lose hope in Christ and His doctrine. He knew the God of his salvation. Despite the bleakness your husband saw in his future — a world set to self-destruct — *God* saw only His Son who would transport him to the joys of everlasting life. And despite what your husband saw in himself — a detestable creature, saturated with ineptness and vacant of worth — *God* saw a creature whom His Son had redeemed and clothed with His righteousness.

God's grace and the depression bully

Sometimes in life we need help defending ourselves. I learned that when I was in first grade and was afraid for a time walking to school. A sixth grader had identified me as timid and an easy target for teasing. If this bully had gotten his way, his daily harassing would have continued for some time. Thankfully, my brother Klemet walked to school with me one day to stand up to my tormenter. Very little was said. The two of us simply entered the playground. Glances were exchanged. And the bully took no time noting that he was no match for my brother. And that ended it. He never teased me again.

Depression has all the components of a gutless bully. “You are a worthless and miserable individual,” it screams at its victims. “An utter disgrace to the human race! Your life is hopeless! Why bother fighting me? You might as well give up now!” When your husband was overpowered by his depression, he was prohibited from hearing anything but what his illness was telling him. And

it wasn't telling him that Jesus loved him, that He bore his griefs or carried his sorrows. It told him, without equivocation, that he was not worthy of being saved.

Can Christian faith survive such an assault? Some have their doubts. The despairing Christian, presumably, may be likened to the prize fighter who's said to have only so many fights in him. Eventually he loses his stamina until there's no saying whether he'll remain on his feet for even one round if he enters the ring again. Depression and mental illness, some imagine, pose the same threat. And since those suffering from depression don't have the option to opt out — to pick their fights, take a few bouts off, or determine whether they might outlast their opponent before they enter the ring — there is no telling how long they can continue fighting the good fight.

If remaining in the faith were dependent upon one's ability to overcome mental illness, we might agree your husband was in great jeopardy of losing his way. What is truly relevant this day, however, is whether he would get to choose whether to go up against the devil, who had his sights set on your loved one. Let there be no doubt. If Satan had his way, your husband would not simply have forfeited his earthly life. He would have forfeited his eternal life. Thankfully, you know differently. Like many others in the church today, your husband who despaired was a Christian. His despair, however, was not a choice. It was triggered by severe depression and an accumulation of major stresses in life. He may have been bullied into despising himself. But he was not bullied into despising or rejecting God's Word. His illness beat him down, affecting his ability to reason and relate to the message of grace. It had no say, however, with respect to his faith. He believed the Gospel of Christ crucified.

Your husband, for that reason, ought not be compared to the disciple, Judas, who hanged himself after betraying his Lord to the chief priests for 30 pieces of silver (MATT. 27:3-5). When Judas saw that as a result of his sin Jesus was to be condemned, he

despaired of God's grace. Refusing to believe he could be forgiven, he committed suicide. Your husband, on the other hand, had no misunderstanding about God's grace. He knew that, despite his struggles to trust in the Lord Jesus when life seemed to be crumbling and falling, despite his many reasons for feeling contempt for himself, God's free gift of grace can save. For it saves despite the effects or scope of one's sin. Neither must you have any misunderstanding of God's grace. On the days when your husband was convinced his life was no longer salvageable, it was his illness speaking, not his faith. He lost hope in this life, not faith in the Gospel. His illness could bully and shame him with all its might. But God, who restores and sustains our faith in His Son, our Savior, is stronger. His voice is louder, and He alone has the final word.

Living and dying in God's grace

Even knowing and trusting all of this, your questions periodically will close in on you and pester you. How can you know for sure that your husband died saved by God's grace? Did he fight the good fight up until the very end? Did he remain in the faith? Having lived in God's grace, did he die in God's grace? Or was it impossible because he was simply despairing of God's help for too long?

When these questions crowd up around you, pause and remember what it *means* to be saved by grace. Paul teaches us in Ephesians: "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast" (EPH. 2:8-9). To be saved by grace is to be saved by God, without any merit of our own. He saves us by His gift of faith in God our Savior, which He grants us through His Gospel. Despite our unworthiness — our inability to live a righteous life — God has died for our sins and caused us to believe this. This means our sin — even the sin of suicide — does not serve as the final answer to what we can expect out

of this life and the next. God's grace does. God does not receive us on the basis of *our* disposition but *His*. And this is the same for sinners all the way across the span of history. Mass murderers, child abusers, pious church members and those who die by suicide are all saved in the same way: by God's grace poured out for them on the cross.

That God saves us by His grace, furthermore, means that God is committed to us throughout our lives. We may expect the results of His grace to be ongoing and unwavering. By placing His name on us in Holy Baptism, God has placed us in a state of grace where He will preserve us in the faith and never abandon us. "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me," the Lord promises. "I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand" (JOHN 10:27-28).

This is Jesus' promise, even under the most ominous circumstances: He will not let go of us. Whether we are terrorized by Satan or bullied by mental hopelessness, whether we are suffering from Christian doubts or sins of weakness, the Lord's grip of grace will remain stronger than our grip of faith. We may consider the matter settled. Having laid down His life for us, Jesus has given us eternal life, and no force on this earth, however powerful or fierce, can persuade Jesus to let go of us.

"No one will snatch them out of my hand." You may cling to this doctrinal promise after your husband's suicide. Having been placed into the hand of his Savior by God's Word — having been baptized into God's name and having heard the voice of his Shepherd — he lived in a state of grace. Long story short: His entire existence consisted of dwelling safely under the Lord's spiritual care, where not even the deepest doubts and darkest despair could pry him away from God's saving grace. "But where sin increased, grace abounded all the more" (ROM. 5:20).

Do not agonize over whether your husband remained too long in a state of despair. For it was at the very same time that he

remained in a state of grace. God never leaves His believers high and dry. “A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out” the prophet declares (Is. 42:3 NIV). In every instance, God’s grace is up to the task of saving us. As the Lord did not wait too long to die for you, He did not wait too long to receive your husband into His loving arms for all eternity. And neither will He delay long in relieving you.

It is God’s commitment to the believer living in a state of grace. It is His doctrine. And you may be certain of it. The Lord reigns by His grace both in life and in death.

Remember this as you fight the good fight and aspire to grieve constructively. Genuine Christian grieving happens not when you deny death’s horridness, nor when you lose yourself in anger or guilt or seek to vindicate your stigmatized loved one. The right kind of grieving occurs through faith in Christ and His saving doctrine of grace.

And so it is in view of Christian doctrine that we may indeed receive comfort with respect to the suicide of your husband. As *God* knew his heart, so may *we*. We may not know the nature of his torments and what was in his *mind*. However, we may be certain of what was in his *heart*. God’s Word had been planted there — in Baptism, by the proclamation of the Gospel and by Christ’s own body and blood in Holy Communion — and that Word is powerful to save.

Your turn to despair?

You may rightly rejoice in that Word. That having been said, it may be in the aftermath of suicide that your life’s story is beginning to sound much like your husband’s. Now it’s you who’s feeling overwhelmed and without any earthly hope. Now it’s you who wears the shroud of despair. Your grief is dictating how you see yourself, and it’s affecting you inside and out. Your sense of worth is inseparably linked to your perceived failures. You were incapable of offering your husband the encouragement

he needed to regain hope. If you said it once, you said it a dozen times: He was not the disaster he believed he was. The life he shared with you and your children was overflowing with God's grace and every blessing. But in the end, you failed. Rather than accepting your words of reassurance, he accepted death. And now you're left feeling incapacitated, crushed and ashamed.

Be assured that the Lord's promise of grace to your husband is also His promise to you. Your Christian hope is not dependent upon seeing. "We walk by faith, not by sight" (2 COR. 5:7). Rather, it has its source in God's saving gifts. The prophet declares, "For he has clothed me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteousness" (IS. 61:10). You may not see it, but even today you may exchange your putrid shroud of sin and sorrow with the unblemished robe of righteousness and hope. For of chief importance is not what *you see presently*, but what *the Lord sees everlastingly*. Looking at you and your husband, Jesus does not see a pair of disappointments. He sees sinners for whom He died — *redeemed* sinners whom He has adopted as His holy children.

Gospel for the grieving

When a Christian is overcome by mental illness and dies by suicide, he loses his life as a consequence of his sin. This doesn't mean, however, that he loses his salvation.

Luther once said of suicides, "I don't share the opinion that suicides are certainly to be damned. My reason is that they do not wish to kill themselves but are overcome by the power of the devil. They are like a man who is murdered in the woods by a robber."¹² Satan may drive the despairing Christian to kill himself, but he hasn't the power to drive him to hell.

¹² Martin Luther, *Luther's Works: Table Talk (Vol. 54)*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), 29.

And so you may grieve in hope this day. The doctrine of Jesus Christ, you see, is not up for debate. The Christian lives in a state of grace. We have the Lord's guarantee that He will not let us fall. He will keep us in the faith through the Word and Sacraments. Every instant of every hour of every day the Lord assures us that He will defend our faith and shield us from the devil's attacks. And God is absolutely trustworthy. He will not abandon us to the ravaging effects of mental illness. Having *called* us to faith through the Gospel, He also *sustains* us in the faith through the Gospel.

Recall the familiar words of St. Paul:

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died — more than that, who was raised — who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written,

“For your sake we are being killed all the day long;
we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.”

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (ROM. 8:31-39)

Even as I acknowledge the reality of sin and death in my loved one's life, I will cling to Christ's Word and promise. Trusting only in His power to save, I will grieve for the suicide.

VICTORY ROUND

Free to Grieve at the Foot of the Cross

AS I WENT ROUND AFTER ROUND *with my grief over Jean's death, my measure of comfort increased through the assurance of Scripture and Christian doctrine.*

That's not to say there weren't days when I still struggled to grieve for my wife. I especially fought to know how to talk to others about her death. Even as I worked through my own private pain, I remained in damage control mode. I was shadowboxing against suicide's ghost and the dreadful stigma that continued to hound my grief. My public battle remained, in essence, an effort to protect Jean's reputation, not simply as a mother and wife, but as a Christian. She was a believer, and I'd defy anyone who would suggest that she was anything but a believer! There would be no conceding!

Yet finding the words to speak this truth or any truth about Christian suicide out loud was difficult. One particular moment especially stands out in my mind. I was standing by Jean's casket during the viewing. A gentleman approached me, paused for a moment, then muttered under his breath, "What a waste!" If it were not for the fact

that I was his pastor — and if I hadn't known that he was trying to console me in his own misguided way — I could have slugged him. Did he realize what his words meant to me? What they communicated? In his mind, there was just one right response to my wife's suicide: It was a terrible tragedy, nothing more! There was no silver lining to this cloud. Zero comfort, zero peace, zero hope.

I constrained myself at the time, saying nothing in response. The memory of his words stayed with me, though, and I continued to mull over how I might have responded to them with the Gospel truth. Jean's life wasn't a waste. From her first breath to her last, her life was a gift. And although she had lost the battle against depression, by God's grace through faith in Christ, she had gained the victory over death. The Lord had seen to it, having chosen her before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before Him (EPH. 1:4).

As I allowed myself to be encouraged by this most comforting declaration of Scripture, I was emboldened to speak about God's salvation after suicide. This happened not because I correctly understood suicide's stigma or the psychology of mental illness. I gained confidence, rather, because of the teachings of my Savior, who saves even the suicide by grace alone. I found my peace looking not at myself, or at Jean, or at suicide itself, but by looking only to the cross of Christ.

Sports authorities call it "the victory round." At the conclusion of the final round of the fight, you celebrate. No longer is there a question about who the underdog is and whether you'll survive this grueling match. It's official. Holding up his hand, the referee declares you the victor. The victory round is also celebrated by believers. Even in our deepest mourning, we are privileged to celebrate victory through the death and resurrection of our Savior.

Jean died a Christian. She has received the crown of righteousness. A decision has been rendered. By God's grace, she remained in the faith. And as for you and me, fellow believers in Christ's church, we may celebrate the Lord's decision.

Grieving for your middle-aged sister

You know the Gospel. You know that it is Christ alone who saves sinners from hell. But as you look back on the life of your sister, who suffered for years from schizophrenia before taking her own life, you still are filled with doubt. She was a Christian, to be sure, but it wasn't always apparent. When she was taking her medications faithfully and they were working as they should, her faith was easy to see — but when something went wrong (as it often did), her thinking became confused, and the voices inside her head took over. At these times, which became more and more frequent toward the end, she rarely darkened a church door.

For a short, happy season before the end finally came, she was doing quite well. She wasn't hearing voices instructing her to hurt herself, and you were both very hopeful. Unfortunately, her improved mental health allowed her to believe she could ease up on her medication. She was sure she could go it alone. That's when all hell broke loose. In no time she became extremely dependent and ambivalent about life. "It's too late to fix things!" she moaned. "My life is rigged against me!" You tried encouraging her — to trust God, to seek help — but by then, she had lost any ability to think clearly. And then the end came. Desperate for relief, she gave into the very temptation she had been battling for so long, and she let her disease win.

You've heard some speak of a final phase of grieving, referring to a period of acceptance. After a time of shock and denial, anger and guilt, concession and depression, the experts tell you, you finally accept what has come to pass. Your sister is gone, and you

are prepared to move on. It's what she said she wanted you to do: "Accept the facts and move on!" Is it time, then, to simply accept the fact that she was lost — perhaps eternally?

You wish you could opt out of grieving altogether. Those around you seem perfectly able to ignore the elephant in the room. It's obvious that people don't know what to say to you. You don't really know what to say to them, either. They imagine you require an entirely different kind of comfort than the words of Christian reassurance needed when they lost their family member to cancer. Surely, they seem to think, you'll want to move on to the next chapter of your life as soon as possible — to stop talking and thinking about your sister's death — to let go of any chance to receive true comfort in your grieving. *Accept the facts and move on.* But is this really the final phase of your grieving?! Is Christian hope really out of reach after suicide?

To equate grieving with "accepting the facts and moving on" is understandable. Outside the grace of Christ, it is no doubt the best we can hope for from the grieving process. For the Christian, however, such hopeless grieving is never necessary. As a believer in Christ, you may look death squarely and fearlessly in the eye as you rest securely in the loving arms of your Savior. Recall His pledge, "Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live" (JOHN 11:25). Jesus has spoken these words to *you*. The final round of your fight is not a time to accept the somber facts regarding your sister's death. It's a time to accept and rejoice in Christ's victory over sin.

Elected by grace

But can you truly and fully trust in God's salvation, even for your schizophrenic sister? You can, thanks to the blessed doctrine of God's election.

The doctrine of election gets a bad rap these days in many Christian circles. This is partly due to the strong influence of the Calvinist version of this teaching, commonly known as "double

predestination.” By this teaching, many Reformed Protestant churches confess that, before the creation of the world, God chose (elected) some people for salvation and other people for eternal damnation. By this line of thinking, we poor mortals get no say in the matter. It’s God’s call entirely: Either He saves us, or He damns us. End of story.

This idea that some are elected to hell doesn’t sit well in American Christianity for obvious reasons. For one thing, it goes squarely against the “rugged individualism” so precious to the American psyche. The doctrine, furthermore, opposes biblical Christianity, contradicting the scriptural truths that Christ died for the sins of the whole world (JOHN 3:16) and that God “desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 TIM. 2:4).

So must we then discard the teaching of election? Not at all. While “double predestination” is clearly unsupported by biblical teaching, “single predestination” — the belief that God alone chooses us, calls us, saves us and keeps us in the faith — is as scripturally sound as it is comforting to those who suffer the pangs of doubt. Consider the words of Paul in Romans 8: “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified” (ROM. 8:28–30). Note who the agent is throughout these verses: *God* foreknows, *God* predestines, *God* calls, *God* justifies, *God* glorifies. Make your sister the object of these sentences, and you’ll find even greater comfort for your grief: God foreknew her. He predestined her. He called her. He justified her. And now He has glorified her.

It goes without saying: The teaching of predestination is intended not for those who seek an *excuse* to sin but for those who seek

a *release* from sin. It is to be shared, furthermore, not with one who is *conspiring* to sin but with one who is *grieving* over his sin. By the same token, the teaching is not reserved for those who come from “better stock” or seem more inclined to give the good fight their best shot. God did not elect us because we were smarter, holier, healthier or better looking than others. God did not choose us because we seemed like better candidates for salvation and were more likely to avoid committing the most tragic sins. He chose us despite our inability to do so. He chose us out of His grace and goodness — not ours. And He made it official by causing us to believe in His Son through the power of the Gospel. That is all you need to know in the end regarding your sister and her faith in Christ. The Lord never leaves our hearts unprotected from attack. Inasmuch as you, your sister and I have been elected to everlasting life, the Lord has the Holy Spirit working around the clock to preserve us.

A wonderful mystery

The doctrine of predestination is a most wonderful mystery. Nothing can possibly convince God to renege on His decision and promise. We may be certain of heaven not because God foresaw something good or less sinful in us than He saw in others. Truthfully, we were still dead in our sins when God revealed His choice to us, making us alive with Christ by His grace (EPH. 2:5). Despite our utter sinfulness, however, God determined out of His grace that He would give us faith in Christ and His Gospel so that we should spend eternity with Him.

The same decision is conveyed this day regarding your sister. God held an election and elected *her* to be a child of God and an heir of eternal life. Only one vote was cast, but God cast it and that made it unanimous! Before God even created the world, she was chosen to be a lamb of the Good Shepherd. That is why your sister recognized Jesus’ voice and was baptized into His name. It’s why she followed Him, why she remained in the faith even

as her mind fell to pieces within her, and why this very day she is with Christ in heaven. We needn't justify her any more than we need justify ourselves. "Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is *God* who justifies" (ROM. 8:33, emphasis added).

You know this and are comforted by the fact. The Lord's sheep, those whom God has elected, do not despise the Holy Spirit and the message of God's grace. And neither did your sister. Just ask what is already evident to you from the life you both shared: Was she baptized into the holy name of the Triune God? Had she heard and believed the saving Gospel of Christ crucified? Did she hunger for God's message of salvation and grace? Did the Lord cause her, on the one hand, to believe she was a sinner not deserving of eternal life, but, on the other hand, to trust in Christ alone and His atoning sacrifice? Yes? Then you have no reason to question whether your sister was among God's chosen. Before God even made the world, He elected her to spend eternity with her Savior!

It's God's memory that matters

Your sister's election is now sure, but your own temptation to despair will continue, as you agonize over the memories she left behind. The images you have of her as calm and collected, fun and full of life must now compete with more recent images of a woman who was unstable and paranoid. You want to remember her as someone who was very positive and encouraging — but you are forced to remember her also as someone one who was irrational and destructive. You know who your sister really was. Or at least, you hope you do.

Be assured that the only memory that matters in the end is the memory of your Lord. What will He remember about your sister until the earth's destruction? That she was raving mad, incapable of making any sense at all? I'll tell you what sounds raving mad to some: Not only that the Lord should choose her from eternity through the cross, but that He should also forget for all

eternity every dirty detail of her sin. But is it so crazy to believe this? Remember that “the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 COR. 1:18 NIV).

As you remember your sister’s life of sin and grace, remember, too, God’s eternal promise through the prophet Isaiah:

Fear not, for I have redeemed you;

I have called you by name, you are mine.

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;

and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;

when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,

and the flame shall not consume you.

For I am the Lord your God,

the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. ...

I, I am he

who blots out your transgressions for my own sake,

and I will not remember your sins. (IS. 43:1-3, 25)

Your fight has been fixed!

Few fights are regarded as more despicable. You’re paid to throw the fight. For the right price, you agree to take the fall. There is no true winner! The fight was rigged, fixed! You cheated!

As believers, we may speak with confidence of another fight that’s fixed: ours. Only the win is one in which we rejoice. Although we do not deserve to win, Christ takes the fall and assures the victory. Our Lord, with His holy precious blood, pays for our sin and guarantees our victory over sin, death and the devil. It may be said as believers that we have *truly* “cheated” death. God has fixed the fight for you and me. On the cross, He lost. By His death and resurrection, we win. And by electing you to everlasting life, He guarantees to you and me personally that we will remain with Him eternally as His beloved children.

The doctrine of election lets you believe with certainty not simply in your loved one's victory on the day he died, but in your own victory today and every day. Perhaps you're not feeling much like a winner today. You've lost your loved one. You wonder whether you've lost the respect of certain friends and relatives after your heartbreaking loss. You even fear the loss of faith. It's a bit ironic. As people question the authenticity of your loved one's faith, it seems more appropriate for you to question your own faith. Who's to say how things will progress from here?

It is never the Lord's intention to keep us in suspense regarding our salvation. Even when our life is coming apart at the seams, we may be confident God's Word is up to the task. The disciple Peter was once encouraged by this truth. You may remember the story. The disciples were in a boat together at sea battling the wind and waves. Suddenly they saw Jesus walking toward them on the water and they were terrified, mistaking Him as a ghost. Immediately, Jesus reassured them, saying, "Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid." But Peter, wanting some additional reassurance, answered, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." Surely Peter was thinking that, as only Jesus and His Word could save them and relieve their fears, perhaps Jesus and His Word would work something exceptional here. Jesus immediately consented, telling Peter, "Come," and Peter trusted Jesus' Word. Getting out of the boat, he instantly began to walk on the water toward Jesus. We may only imagine the thoughts of the other disciples. "He's got to be kidding! Does he really expect to walk on water?!" Then came the moment of truth. Seeing the wind and waves, Peter let go of Jesus' Word and began to sink. Fortunately, this was not the end of the story. Jesus' Word did not stop working; He did not let Peter sink deep into the watery abyss. The very next moment, rather, Jesus reached out His hand and took hold of him (MATT. 14:24-31). Despite Peter's imperfect faith, Jesus saved him by His Word.

Jesus would not let nature take its course with His disciple. And neither will the Lord watch today's believers drown in despair. As Jesus reached out to Peter, as He reached out to your sister, so will He reach out to you. He does so with His Word. And His Word will never fail you. This was the Lord's promise to your sister even when faced with the harshest adversities. "But with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it" (1 COR. 10:13). The way of escape is the Word Jesus has given His church: His Gospel and the Sacraments. Never shall you fear that God will abandon you to your temptations. Never will He overestimate what you in your suffering can bear, giving you more than your faith can handle. Much to the contrary, God will in every case sustain your faith through His ever-powerful Word. Through His Word, to which your hands remain fastened, He will continue to assure you that your fight has been fixed: fixed by Christ in your favor.

Fighting the good fight after suicide

Suicide has taken your mother, your son, your daughter, your husband, your sister — someone who shared your life and your faith, someone impossibly dear to you. And now the devil and the sinful world have conspired to spread slanderous lies about both the person you loved and the Gospel that saved them. You feel constrained to fight back. But how? The painful reality of suicide would have you concede, throw in the towel and give up your fight. “Don’t dare to hope that you’ll see them again. Don’t dare to grieve in Christian joy. Just try to forget and move on.”

Remember, though, the words of St. Paul: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith” (2 TIM. 4:7). Despite the afflictions and temptations that are sure to continue, we keep on fighting. How? Not by giving up but by defending the Christian faith with our confession and life. At long last, we finish the race and obtain the crown. We prevail with God’s help, not by conceding to the enemy but by fighting another day!

St. Paul exclaims, moreover, “I do not box as one beating the air” (1 COR. 9:26). Paul did not fight, as it were, never to land a blow. He knew that his work was not pointless. Preaching the Gospel would convert and console where and when it pleased the Lord. The words of Paul reassure believers of today engaged in battle. As we defend the faith and confession of those who’ve preceded us in the faith, we know that the Christian’s fight is never futile. Your loved one may have lost the last round, but they did not lose the fight. And neither need you fear losing in the end. Fighting the good fight, after all, is not contingent on diminishing suicide’s stigma or putting the ignorant and insensitive in their place. It is not dependent on confirming most convincingly that your loved one remained a believer. You simply confess the faith by which they were saved. Even in the midst of your grieving, you declare to those around you that they were a Christian and died a Christian.

Even in the aftermath of a suicide, you may fight the good fight, certain that you'll prevail. You win, not by forgetting your past or undoing your calamity. You win by recalling God's grace through Jesus Christ and the forgiveness He gained for every sin, even the sin of suicide. Call to mind the good fight of your Savior, by which He secured salvation for the whole world and landed an eternal knockout punch against the devil himself! The author to the Hebrews records, "Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil" (HEB. 2:14). Christ took on our human nature, so that in our place He might face the devil's assaults head on. Satan wanted your loved one to give up on life and abandon hope in Christ. Similarly, the devil wants you to give up on the belief that your loved one is really saved, that they reside in heaven this day with the Savior. Dying in our place, however, Jesus has destroyed the devil's power. As Christians, consequently, we are privileged to participate in Christ's victory over Satan. It is your victory, specifically, that permits you to participate in the good fight. Acknowledge why you're not beat. Satan's hounding has been stifled and Christ has rendered all stigmatizing of a Christian suicide irrelevant. The only one to whom you need give ear is the One who equips you as a believer and a confessor of the cross. "Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted" (HEB. 12:3).

With respect to Christ's fight there is no split decision. No scoring or calculating is necessary. No sin is left uncovered. And no further tallying is required. Despite slipping and staggering, reeling and wavering, your loved one fought the good fight and died upright in the Christian faith. They finished the race and received the crown of righteousness (2 TIM. 4:7-8). The Lord died for your loved one that they might live. He rose from the dead that they might never die. And He ascended into heaven, where

He continues to work all things to your good and to fight and intercede on your behalf.

Grieving as a confession of faith

In Christ, your loved one has triumphed over death — even death by suicide — and so have you. One fight remains for you, though: How do you talk about that death with others? More to the point: How can you make even your grief a bold confession of your faith?

Not all fights, after all, are deemed appropriate for public consumption. Consider the sport most Americans consider politically incorrect: dog fighting. After having been bred, conditioned and trained for maximum aggression, an animal is forced to maul his presumed equal, all for the purpose of entertainment and profit. The two dogs are placed in a pit with no rules; only that they fight to the bitter end, until one of the dogs can no longer continue. It's a dreadful spectacle, and many would argue that it's morally wrong even to watch. It glorifies violence and demeans God's gift of life.

Many would argue the same about your grief after suicide. You're expected not to dignify the fight your loved one fought. As uncomfortable as it is for them to think about your loved one's cause of death, it's just as uncomfortable for them to hear you talk about his eternal victory in Christ. "Stop defending the memory of your loved one!" their glances and body language imply. "Just shut up about it! Grieve if you must, but also accept the spiritual implications of a death like this. While you can't undo her tragic choice, you can (and we wish you would) choose to keep quiet about it and move on."

Made confident by the grace of God in Christ, you do not need to listen to these voices, real or imagined. When you're with God's people, listening to His Word and teaching, you have no reason to keep silent. You may grieve out loud. Our grieving, after all, is not an acknowledgment of defeat — that our sin has

forever ruined us. It is an admission, rather, that sin and death are our enemies and that we are dependent upon God to save us.

Such public displays of grief before fellow believers have been a common practice since ancient times. In the Old Testament, God's people gave numerous indications when they were in mourning. They would fast. They would sing and wail and lament. They would tear their clothing and wear mourning dresses or even rough sackcloth. They would sit on the ground, put ashes on their head and walk barefoot. Everything they did in their mourning identified them as ones dependent on God for deliverance from sin and death.

In the New Testament, such grief continued, but after Christ's victorious resurrection, that grief became forever intertwined with Christian hope and boundless joy. We no longer grieve like others do who lack the certainty of everlasting life. There is only grace and everlasting life for sinners made righteous by God. So even as we grieve — honestly, fully, openly — we can also declare with joy that our loved one who was lost to suicide is safely in heaven with his Savior. "Truly, truly, I say to you," Jesus prophecies, "you will weep and lament ... You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy" (JOHN 16:20).

As people hear your word of grief and hope, be reassured. True comfort for everyone involved comes not from giving into the lie that suicide can snatch a saint of God out of His hands. It comes from hearing and confessing to each other the truth about your loved one: They remain God's child. For them, your Savior died, and in His life, they will rise.

Don't be afraid to speak plainly about this with everyone who knew them. Talk about your memories and how much you miss them. Talk about how much their death hurts you. Then talk about the life of faith that God gave to them in Baptism. Talk about Christ's great compassion for them, and the blood He shed for them on the cross. Talk about paradise, where they now reside. Talk about how, in the life to come, there is no depression

or hopelessness, no scandal or disgrace, only our Savior and His redeeming grace.

Yes, your fight continues. As you defend the faith, you will also defend your right to grieve. It is your great privilege as a Christian to assure those in your life that you trust in your Savior's power to deliver your loved one from sin and death, just as He does all sinners who believe. To all those who would judge your grief and your hope to be futile, you may boldly declare: "I don't buy it! Even now, death doesn't get the last word. Christ does!"

The fight goes on, but the victory is already yours. This, above all, defines the entire grieving process. On the very day you mourn over the death of your loved one, you rejoice in their victory crown.

My loved one has died by suicide. By the grace of God, I am free to grieve. My loved one is alive with Christ forevermore. By the grace of God, I am free to rejoice. Just as other believers grieve for those who have died in the faith, I may also say, in faith and hope, with boldness and confidence, *I will grieve for the suicide.*

EPILOGUE

My Family's Journey Through Grief

THROUGHOUT THE PAGES OF THIS BOOK, I've shown bits and pieces of my own journey through grief after my wife's death. After finishing the book, however, I realized that the story was incomplete and without a proper ending. In the paragraphs that follow, then, I hope to share with you a few more memories and relate briefly "the rest of the story." I do so not to brag about my life but in the hopes that you may be assured — as I have been by God's grace — to know that hope, healing and peace are possible, even after suicide.

'A heritage from the Lord'

"I'm doing fine! God is with me." I wasn't just offering a line. But how convincing was I? After Jean died, it did not take me long to realize it wasn't just *me* who needed reassurance from *others*. Sometimes *others* needed *my* reassurance. It happened more than once. After making someone's acquaintance, the subject of my family would inevitably come up. "I'm recently widowed ... My wife committed suicide ... I have six children between the ages of 1 and 12." I learned that a single expression can communicate far more than what someone puts into words. Just by the look on a person's face, I could tell that I had to say something more. I was not about to let them pity me. "My children are not a burden, but a blessing!"

There were other times, interestingly, when my single parenthood generated a very different response — not pity, but awe. I remember visiting McDonald's one day with all six children. After we ordered our food and found a seat, I sensed a young man observing us from the next table. I looked up and noted his glance. Without delay he remarked, "They're not all yours?!" Had he seen a set of parents sitting with the children I'm guessing he may have had a different reaction. But here I was, a father, all by myself, treating my six young children to an afternoon out. It engendered in him a look of admiration. And for me it was a moment of pride. "Yes, they are!" I answered. Had he examined my expression closely, he would have found it easy to read. "They are my life and my joy!" As Solomon has declared, "Behold, children are a heritage from the Lord ... Blessed is the man who fills his quiver with them!" (PS. 127:3, 5)

'A wife of noble virtue'

"As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts," the Lord declares in Isaiah 55. In His goodness, God did not leave me alone in my grief. He brought Julie into my life. Less than three years after Jean's death, I remarried.

In hindsight I can only imagine the questions running through my children's minds when I told them what was coming. What was this about? Why did I want a new wife? Did they really need another mom? Didn't I still love and miss their mother? Naturally, I had questions of my own, which I also chose to keep to myself. Did Julie have any idea what she was getting into? Would she be able to comprehend what my children had been through?

What I said to them that day reassured both my children and me. I had met someone, I told them, who would soon be joining our family. Why? It wasn't because I needed help. It wasn't that life must move on. True, she was to be my wife. And, yes, she

would be a mother to them. But more importantly, I loved Julie, and she loved me. And just as importantly, she would love them, and they would love her. We weren't marrying out of necessity or inadequacy, but out of love. And despite the challenges we'd surely face, God would use Julie to bless our family in amazing ways.

I worked hard to retain a balance. On the one hand, I must respect and help my children cherish the memories they had of their mother, Jean, and their love for her. On the other hand, I must help them welcome and respect Julie as my wife who would serve as a second parent. She wouldn't be "Mom" to them, but "Ma." Julie was not replacing Jean, and Jean was not to be forgotten. It did not happen overnight, but over time, all of the children would come to value their "Ma" as I did.

"An excellent wife who can find? She is far more precious than jewels ... Her children rise up and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her" (PROV. 31:10, 28).

'Weep with those who weep'

Julie unknowingly aided the children with their grieving. But it would take years for us to see this. Having a new mother join the family, after all, initially triggered some tension and bouts of resentment. This was so especially for the older ones, who remembered Jean better than the younger children did. I assured them all, though, again and again, that they could show love and respect for Ma without forsaking their love and respect for Mom. Over time, the children became convinced of this. When the rest of the family reminisced about Jean, Julie was willing to take a back seat and listen to the children speak about their memories of their mother, even watching old videos of Jean interacting with them. In short, Julie was a crucial influence in the years immediately following Jean's death. She offered structure to our life and a welcome shift from our former mode of thinking. We were no longer a family whose mother had committed a

suicide. We were a father and mother and six kids healing from a suicide.

By the time I married Julie, the initial pain I had felt after Jean's suicide was gone, but my grieving was far from over. I tried my best to be sensitive to Julie's position. I still missed Jean deeply, but I tried to conceal it. I had loved Jean dearly, but that was yesterday; today I loved Julie. When the waves of grief came over me, I wondered: Should I weep for my first love in plain sight? How would that be of any benefit to our marriage? Besides, Julie had never known Jean. What would she know about comforting me in my loss? Shouldn't I just bottle up my grief for her sake?

I'm grateful that Julie had other thoughts. To this very day, she's welcomed my tears whenever they come. The trigger might be a discussion about Jean and the children growing up. Or a random comment might bring to mind a certain memory. Or perhaps we're watching a television show that highlights a suicide. I flash back to the circumstances leading up to Jean's death. My eyes tear up, I utter a silent sob — and Julie is quick to comfort me. For better, for worse, she understands what Christian marriage is all about, and heeds Paul's exhortation to “rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep” (ROM. 12:15).

‘I know my own and my own know me’

It may have been several weeks or months. I don't recall for sure. The shock of Jean's death began to wear off, and I began to organize my thoughts about her suicide. I was angry at those who, having bought into suicide's stigma, dared to judge her because of how she died. What right had they to assume she died in unbelief? They didn't even know her!

I found it extremely therapeutic in my grieving to jot down my thoughts regarding the paradoxes of a Christian's suicide. I was bound and determined to resolve what appeared to be an impossible contradiction: a Christian who decides to kill herself. God's Word provided great insight. Despite what seems like the

loss of faith and an unforgivable sin, the Lord covers the suicide with His blood, saving her by His grace. Eventually I would complete a book on suicide (*And She Was a Christian*) and find ways to relate to others the doctrinal truths that had offered me strength in my grieving. It has been particularly rewarding for me to present on the subject, speaking at various churches and conferences.

Most recently, a few months ago, I had the privilege of preparing my first funeral sermon for a suicide since Jean took her life. I emphasized that as fragile as our lives and relationships may be, all because of our sinful nature, there is one relationship which remains unaffected: the relationship which Jesus has with the believer. Through the process of preparing that sermon, I had an opportunity to reflect on what I might have said had I been preaching to myself:

What was God thinking when Jean chose the self-destruct setting? I can't answer that. Some mysteries are beyond our comprehension. I can tell you, though, something about what Christ was thinking when He chose to sacrifice His life for us on the cross. No sin, no matter how tragic, would ever again separate us from Him. That's what God would have you know about Him today. Your greatest source of comfort isn't that, under all the pain and dysfunctional thinking, Jean should be remembered for her Christian example rather than for her suicide. She was a wonderful Christian woman even despite her illness, but that isn't what saved her. Your comfort doesn't lie there. What truly comforts you is that she is known by Jesus Christ. It's why He died for every one of her sins, including the sin of suicide. She was His own.

“I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me ... and I lay down my life for the sheep” (JOHN 10:14,15).

‘They have kept your word’

During the last several weeks of Jean’s life, she worried that she could never be the mother our children truly needed. Unless she beat her depression, she thought, they were bound to get into trouble and have their lives and souls utterly ruined. I did not accept her conjectures, but, truth be told, I do not know what might have happened to our family if in raising my children I had remained on my own. Thankfully, the Lord had other plans. Twenty-six years after Jean’s death, and after 23 years of remarriage to Julie, I can say without hesitation that God has blessed us tremendously. And I’m confident He will continue to do so.

Of all the blessings God has given us, the greatest is certainly this: that the Lord has sustained all my children and me in the Christian faith. At this time all four daughters have married, the youngest two just this past year. Julie and I love them dearly and are especially grateful for the loving Christian husbands who support our daughters’ faith and life. My two sons have grown into godly Christian men, whose refusal to compromise their Lutheran beliefs in any circumstance has set an inspiring example to friends and family. Jean’s fears — as was the case with so many of the lies depression told her — have, by God’s grace, proven to be unfounded. All six children have remained in the Christian faith and attend churches that profess Jesus Christ and Him crucified. To God be the glory!

“Yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. ... I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth” (JOHN 17:6, 15-17).

APPENDIX 1

Discussion Questions

Introduction

1. Are Christians immune from mental illness and suicide? What examples of this truth have you encountered in your own life?
2. What painful paradoxes accompany the suicide of a Christian?

Round 1

1. What extraordinary factors make the immediate aftermath of suicide so difficult?
2. How does the long history of stigma surrounding suicide and mental illness continue to affect grieving families today?
3. In what respect is suicide's stigma fed by fear? By ignorance?
4. How does stigma become internalized as shame for grieving loved ones?
5. See John 20:24–26. How did Thomas deprive himself of comfort from the other disciples? When and how did he finally receive comfort in his grief?

6. How do believing families receive true relief from the shame that accompanies a suicide?

Round 2

1. It's human nature to feel angry after any death, but especially after a suicide. Who is it that often bears the brunt of such anger?

2. What kinds of accusations do we bring against others following a suicide? Against ourselves?

3. Is it ever OK to blame or question God?

4. What does it mean to lament before God? What biblical examples do we see of this kind of prayer?

5. Is there such a thing as “righteous anger”? What might that look like for the believer?

6. Who or what should we blame for a loved one's suicide?

7. What role did the scapegoat play in Old Testament religion? In what way did Jesus become our scapegoat?

Round 3

1. What is the pain of hopelessness?

2. How might major depression be compared to an aggressive form of cancer?

3. What is the “impossible choice” confronting many who contemplate suicide?

4. What can psychology tell us about why people commit suicide?

5. How do modern counselors attempt to comfort the grieving? In what ways are their methods and insights useful? Why are their efforts destined to fall short?
6. How does today's death culture attempt to comfort the survivors following a suicide? How is "Gospel relief" superior to "death relief"?

Round 4

1. Is suicide a sin? If so, why?
2. Is suicide an unforgivable sin? If not, why do people so often think that it is?
3. What is doctrine? Is Christian doctrine something we should avoid or embrace after a tragedy like suicide?
4. What is the difference between being a sinner and committing a sin? Are we sinners because we sin, or do we sin because we are sinners?
5. What is the ultimate cause of every human death, including suicide?
6. What earthly consequences accompany the sin of suicide?
7. What does it mean to repent? Does the timing of our repentance matter?
8. How are we comforted as believers knowing that God takes His children home in every instance, according to His timetable, not ours?
9. What is the difference between earthly hope and Christian hope? Can one lose earthly hope without abandoning Christian hope?
10. How is the depression bully identified? How are grieving Christians assured, despite depression's assault upon their loved one, that he or she remained in the faith?

- 11.** What does it mean as a Christian to live in a state of grace? How is this truth particularly relevant for those grieving for a Christian suicide?
- 12.** Why did Martin Luther refuse to think of suicide victims as “certainly damned” souls?

Victory round

- 1.** Grief counselors often say that acceptance is the final stage of grief. How does “acceptance” fall short for grieving families after suicide?
- 2.** What is the doctrine of election or predestination? Why do some object to this doctrine, particularly with regard to the suicide?
- 3.** How does the doctrine of election offer comfort after a Christian suicide?
- 4.** How does God remember a Christian who has committed suicide? What does He not remember?
- 5.** How do grieving families “fight the good fight of faith” after suicide?
- 6.** In what ways does our grieving for a Christian loved one who has committed suicide serve as a confession of faith?
- 7.** Why are we free to grieve in Christian hope even after suicide?

APPENIDIX 2

How to Support a Grieving Family After Suicide

GRIEVING FOR A SUICIDE presents significant challenges for a Christian family. This wasn't a natural death. It wasn't anticipated. It didn't take place in the presence of the family as they prayed and sang hymns. It happened in secrecy and isolation. There was no final "I love you!" The first sign that death was at hand was the horrific discovery of a lonely corpse.

Given these painful realities, it is not unusual for loved ones left behind to struggle as they grieve. The survivors may engage in blame games and scapegoating, in psychoanalyzing and self-inflicted guilt — anything to elude the truth concerning the suicide.

Their struggle, however, can be made easier by the love and support of those around them, especially those within the community of faith. Their fight, and your fight, consists of fixing eyes squarely on both the enemy and on the Lord's heavenly prize. And while you may feel powerless to offer any real help to your Christian friend or family member who has lost a loved one to suicide, there is much you can do.

Below you will find some suggestions for how you can offer comfort and support.

Allow yourself to grieve with them

“Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” (1 COR. 13:7).

To “fight the good fight” after suicide requires that you remain strong but not unfeeling or hard-hearted. I know my children saw me cry when their mother died. If I could go back, however, I’d let them see a few more tears. I’d also leave the door open further for members of my congregation to see me grieving and share in my grief. The church is the Christian’s extended family. We are called by our Lord to depend on one another for comfort and support and to offer one another the same. Regrettably, we too often prefer to be strong on our own.

A few weeks after my wife’s funeral, I spoke of Jean in a sermon. I was preaching about believers who precede us in the faith. I related a dream of mine where I was in heaven for a short time with Jean. As I looked about, I said to her, “You don’t have to be sad anymore.” The dream had served in some sense as an opportunity for me to say goodbye, at least in my own mind. For a short moment during the sermon, I got choked up. I regretted being unable to keep my composure as a pastor to my parishioners at the time. Later, I realized I had given them something. Through my tears, they had received an invitation to join my children and me in our grieving space and cry alongside us.

Offer personal space rather than private space

Surviving family members of a suicide often find it easier to conceal their grief than to be open about it. If they *show* their sorrow, they’re afraid they’ll have to *explain* their sorrow. They’ll have to talk about the suicide. As a friend who’s sensitive to this, you may be uncertain regarding the best way to demonstrate your support. Should you keep your distance and offer them plenty of private time?

Rather than giving them *private* space, consider offering them your *personal* space: a space where they can feel safe from criticism. Let them see your presence as a place of refuge, where it's safe to shed some tears. It may be as simple as inviting the grieving over to talk of former times. By speaking fondly of their loved one, you communicate, "I'm not judging your family member or you. I don't accept the stigma. I believe as you do that your family member loved Jesus and died in Christ. And I miss them, too."

Empathize — with care

As much as survivors may want to grieve, their grieving may have stalled. Perhaps they're angry about the suicide. Or maybe they resent how people have responded to the event with gossip or with less-than-helpful expressions of condolence. I recently spoke to my younger son, asking about his experience grieving for his mother. He was 5 years old when Jean took her life. He spoke of grieving later in his life. I believe his grieving was delayed, first because of his age, and later because he was still angry, not just about his loss but also about some unhelpful comments he had received as a child. Various well-meaning adults, upon learning of his mother's suicide, told him, "I understand." In their effort to be supportive, I imagine they were trying to tell him, "I sympathize with you. No one should have to go through what you have." But even if they understood something about losing a loved one, they did *not* understand *his* loss, and he knew it. How could they?

Don't pretend you can *feel* their pain if you have no frame of reference for understanding it, but do *stand with them* in their pain.¹³ Let them know it's OK to vent. Let them know, too, that nothing they say or feel at this time will mar the relationship

¹³ Stephen M. Saunders, *A Christian Guide to Mental Illness, Vol. 1: Recognizing Mental Illness in the Church and School* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2016), 388.

they have with you and others in the congregation. Standing with them, you will grieve with them.

Assure them that Jesus understands

Although you cannot fully understand their loss or know everything they're going through, what you *do* know is sure to comfort them. It is the Gospel of Christ.

Our gracious Savior is the only One who can sympathize wholeheartedly with them — and He does. Having taken upon Himself our sins, Jesus knows our grief, and He carries our sorrows. Our Lord “endured the cross, scorning its shame” (HEB. 12:2 NIV). You may not know the pain they're going through, but Christ does. As you stand alongside the grieving family, take time to confess the Gospel to them.

Sort with them through the rubble

“For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven ... a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance” (ECCL. 3:1, 4).

You may imagine that a grieving family would prefer that you not talk about their loved one, thus dredging through the debris of painful memories leading up to the suicide. Sorting through the rubble with them, however, may be a good thing. I came to realize that one day after my family's cabin burned to the ground from a forest fire. It was soon time to clean the grounds by cutting down the charred trees, so I started up my chainsaw. Three little trees later, unfortunately, the saw locked up on me. Where was my socket wrench? The chain needed tightening. Oh, that's right! I brought the saw back to our city home the prior year, but I left the wrench in the cabin. It was consumed by the fire. Crud! Just when I was getting going! But my very practical wife, Julie, had some advice for me. “Why don't you look for the wrench? Our closet of tools was right over there!” She pointed to what was now a clump of debris. I responded without hesitation

by laughing, “Yeah right! Do you honestly think a little wrench would survive the fire when everything else has been burned beyond recognition? You’ve got to be kidding!” It may not have been the most logical advice I ever received. But let’s just say that Julie got the last word that day. About 30 seconds later I was handed the wrench. It was very black but very much intact.

It is just as important to sort through the rubble in the aftermath of a suicide. You can help by encouraging the family members to talk about their loved one. “What did you do together as a family? What are some of your happiest memories?” I’m not suggesting it will be easy or that the grieving loved ones will immediately welcome it. I found it very difficult to talk about my memories. I didn’t want to revisit the dismal times. Any time you rummage through your past, you’re bound to brush up against sad memories as well as happy ones. It’s extremely important, however, for those mourning to talk about their memories while they are still fresh, before they lose sight of them. Remind them of this fact. Looking back, I wish I would have reinforced the happy memories of Jean that I shared with my children. It would have helped them associate a more positive identity with their mother, one that wasn’t tainted with sadness, hopelessness and suicide’s stigma. Memories of a beloved family member are tough to share at first. They’re sure to trigger a sense of loss and regret. In time, however, after some healing, the same memories bring joy. We recall what a gift it was to have shared life with Mom or Dad, wife or husband, daughter or son. And we recall that the gift has not expired. What joy to be sure of seeing our loved one again in the life to come! What joy to relate this to the grieving!

Remind them that the dead are more than memories

Grieving is often associated with remembering, and rightly so. Memories keep fresh in our minds the life we shared with a

cherished loved one. And yet the comfort we find in remembering cannot compare at all to the joy of Christian hope for the life to come. The hope we have in Christ means that this person who's preceded us in the faith is more than a memory. We will know them in the life to come. As you return to your memories of the family's loved one, talk about what made him or her unique. Also bear witness to the reality that you'll see that same uniqueness in heaven. Ultimately, even our strongest memories will wither and waste away. The prophet Solomon's comments are clear and concise on this: "For the wise, like the fool, will not be long remembered; the days have already come when both have been forgotten" (ECCL. 2:16 NIV). Deep down, people understand this. Thanks be to God, our believing loved one lives on in more than our memorials and reminiscences. Even after the last memory fades, their souls will remain just as they are now: safe in God's care, awaiting the eternal joy of the resurrection.

Help them settle for nothing less than Christ's promises

Impress upon the grieving family that Christians have a superior way of grieving, one in which we settle for nothing less than Christ's promise of salvation. We don't just accept our loss and move on. We embrace our sorrow, knowing that it never stands alone but is always bound up with the certain joy of everlasting life with Jesus. As our Lord has put it, "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, those who grieve may rejoice at the very moment that they sorrow. This is why Christians needn't fear or avoid grieving, or try to be cured of our grief or quickly get over it.¹⁴ Reinforce this point with the survivors. As Christians, they can face the truth head on, recognizing that death is only a gateway to eternal life.

¹⁴ Gregory P. Schulz, *The Problem of Suffering: A Father's Hope* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2011), 102.

“Truly, I say to you,” Jesus promises the believer, “today you will be with me in paradise” (LUKE 23:43).

Speaking about Christian joy in the wake of death is particularly comforting to those grieving for a suicide. How much easier it is to cry when your tears do not represent anger or guilt or hopelessness but simply sorrow! True: For now, the grieving must endure a time of separation. But joy is coming. Tell those who grieve the full truth about the hope they have in Christ: Their weeping will be followed with laughing, their mourning with dancing!

A special word about grieving with children

“Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction” (JAMES 1:27).

Talking with children about death

The pain of loss after suicide is not reserved for grown-ups. Indeed, grieving for a parent who has committed suicide can be especially intimidating for children, as it requires clearing at least two major hurdles. First, depending on their age, development and previous experiences, children may need to acquire a basic understanding of death itself, a milestone that usually takes place between about 4 and 7 years of age. Second, they will need to comprehend the death of their parent without attributing shame to the death, either for themselves or their parent. Helping a young child overcome these obstacles can be quite challenging. It’s important to be open and honest about the deceased parent, but it’s also important not to create confusion or fear in the child’s mind. These will likely be the hardest conversations of your life.

To begin with, you must tell the child the basic truth: “No. Mommy is not sleeping. To die means she isn’t waking up. She won’t talk anymore, eat anymore, breathe anymore. We won’t

see her anymore until we die. And because she has died, we are sad, for we will miss her very much.”

You must also, clearly and boldly, confess your eternal hope for them: “Daddy isn’t sick anymore. He’s no longer sad or afraid, because he’s with Jesus, who died on the cross to save him from his sins. Someday you and I will see Daddy again when we get to heaven.”

You will want to be ready for both silence and a barrage of questions: “What do you mean he’s in heaven? If heaven is so nice, why can’t I go there to see Daddy? Doesn’t he want to be with me anymore?” Answer the child’s questions as honestly as you can, but don’t be afraid to admit when you don’t know the answer.

Meanwhile, don’t expect children to accept their loss and your explanation overnight. Keep in mind that besides your words, they have two more teachers: time and tears. Take the time to cry with them and talk about their memories of their parent and the time they’ll spend with Mom or Dad in heaven.

Talking with children about suicide

The second hurdle in grieving may take place immediately following the death or a few years later, when a child is more mature. Whenever it happens, the child will at some point begin to process not only their parent’s death, but their death by *suicide*.

As much as you’d like to prevent the child from attributing shame to their parent’s death, more questions are bound to surface as the reality sets in: “What do you mean I don’t have to feel bad? She killed herself! She left us!” Or, “I don’t care if he was sick! Did he have to give up? Didn’t he love us? Did I make him feel this way?” On one side, the child is grappling with the stigma. It’s evident what others believe. Those who commit suicide are crazy, selfish, weak, bad people. On the other side, the

child is confronting the act of suicide. How do they deal with their parent's sin?

In these conversations, it's best to keep your answers simple but truthful. You may tell the child that Mommy's sickness made her very unhappy. She was so sad she didn't want to live anymore, so she chose a way to die that was sad, and that wasn't good.¹⁵ She ended her life. Relate that what Mommy did was a sin. Ending her life was a choice that is only God's to make. Remind the child, however, that Jesus died for Mommy's sin as He died for the sins of the world. Therefore, we know she's in heaven today. Finally, teach the child that there are two elements of grieving. There is mourning and there is rejoicing. As with the death of any Christian, we mourn that "the wages of sin is death," but we rejoice that "the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (ROM. 6:23).

¹⁵ John Hewett, *After Suicide* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980), 69.

APPENDIX 3

Scriptures of Comfort

NOTHING OFFERS greater comfort to those who mourn than the promises of God in His Holy Word.

Listed below are a number of passages that have been particularly helpful to me as I have grieved and walked alongside others who grieve after suicide.

On shame and stigma

He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken.

— Is. 25:8

All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned — every one — to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

— Is. 53:6

I will greatly rejoice in the Lord; my soul shall exult in my God, for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself like a priest with a beautiful headdress, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.

— Is. 61:10

Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies.

— Rom. 8:33

On death and dying

See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god beside me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand.

— Deut. 32:39

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.

— 1 Thess. 4:13–14

The time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.

— 2 Tim. 4:6–8

For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's.

— Rom. 14:8

For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God.

— Job 19:25–26

On Christ's suffering

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been

tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

— Heb. 4:15–16

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

He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.

— Is. 53:3–5

And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” that is, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

— Matt. 27:46

On Christ’s saving love

Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!

— John 1:29

I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep.

— John 10:14–15

My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.

— John 10:27–28

He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

— 1 John 2:2

But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

— Titus 3:4–7

On the certainty of God's salvation

I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

— Rom. 1:16

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.

— Eph. 2:8

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

— Rom. 3:23–24

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved.

— Eph. 1:3–6

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.

— Rom. 8:28–30

For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

— Rom. 8:38–39

We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

— Rom. 6:4

On God's presence during times of grief and temptation

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

— Matt. 11:28

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

— Matt. 5:3–4

No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.

— 1 Cor. 10:13

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too.
— 2 Cor. 1:3–5

A bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench.
— Is. 42:3

But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.
— 2 Cor. 12:9–10

For the Lord will not cast off forever, but, though he cause grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love.
— Lam. 3:31–32

Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good! Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him!
— Ps. 34:8

APPENDIX 4

Prayers for the Afflicted and the Grieving

For the mentally ill or despairing

Ever-present Savior, our constant source of encouragement and support, console Your servant, _____, who is feeling overwhelmed by life and suffering from hopelessness. Since Your thoughts are not our thoughts, nor Your ways our ways, we implore You to mold our thinking. Help us reflect less on today's disappointments and more on what You offer the downhearted: forgiveness of sins, life and salvation. As You were forsaken on the cross for us all, teach us not to obsess over our sick or desperate state. Enable us rather to meditate on Your promise that "a bruised reed You will not break, and a faintly burning wick You will not quench." According to Your unchanging grace, give us Christian hope. Help us to focus not merely on the life to come, where there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, but on the riches of the present life, which we receive daily from Your bountiful hand. Hear us for Your name's sake. Amen.

For the person with suicidal thoughts or who has attempted suicide

Merciful Savior and Lord, who alone determines when we are received into Your glory, encourage Your servant, _____, who is feeling desperate and helpless, even yearning to depart from this life. We implore You to relieve *his/her* suffering. Inasmuch as You are able to sympathize with our weaknesses, having been tempted as we are in every respect, yet without sin, assure *him/her* that *he/she* is not alone. Having placed Your name on *him/her* in Baptism, let *him/her* perceive Your faithfulness, that as *he/she* belongs to You, You will not let *him/her* be tempted beyond *his/her* ability, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape. Surround *him/her* with Christian empathy and support and protect *him/her* with Your message of hope and grace, that as You would die our death, so may we through You live life to its fullest. Hear us for Your name's sake. Amen.

For the family touched by mental illness

Lord God, Heavenly Father, whom to know is to trust in Your mercy: Out of the depths we cry to You, beseeching You to hear our voice. Lift us up from our mental afflictions. Where there is worry and a sense of helplessness, give us courage. Where there is fear and panic, give us Your peace that surpasses all human understanding. Where there is confusion and despair, give us hope that will not disappoint us. According to Your gracious will, restore our health, and if it be Your will for our present suffering to continue for a season, grant us patience to bear our cross until such time as what has been sown in dishonor is raised in glory. Meanwhile, fix our eyes firmly on Your Son, Jesus. As He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows, assure us that we may come to Him and receive rest. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

For the family of a suicide

Merciful God and Father, whose judgments are unsearchable, and whose ways are inscrutable, comfort and soothe us in our grief. As we ponder how _____ was taken from us, deter us from attributing blame and defend us from becoming the target of blame. Lead us instead to behold the Lamb of God who removes all blame and guilt, taking upon Himself the sin of the world. We pray You to support us with Your Word and the teaching of Your grace. Reassure us that if while we were still sinners Christ died for us, likewise, while we are still sinners Christ will justify us and promise us His kingdom. Accordingly, enable us to see _____'s death not as a tragedy but as an act of Your gracious will, delivering *him/her* from this vale of tears. Shepherd us in the days before us with the promise of Your Son: "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live" (JOHN 11:25). Amen.

Funeral prayer for a suicide

Merciful Father, whose grace abounds even more than our sin, console us who have gathered and who grieve this day for our fellow believer whom You have received into Your glory. We have felt the sting of death, which is sin. Encourage us now with the promise of new life that You have given us in the death and resurrection of Your Son, Jesus Christ. Lift us up by Your Spirit with the sure hope of the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. And by Your Word enable us to hold up one another through mutual encouragement and support. Deliver us from doubt and despair in the days to come by assuring us that our dearly beloved _____, who has preceded us, is this very day with *his/her* Savior in paradise. Moreover, as we continue to hear the voice of our Shepherd, let us rest assured that we, too, will receive from Him eternal life and that no one can snatch us out of His hand, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Graveside prayer for a suicide

Heavenly Father, God of all comfort, who is near the broken-hearted and saves the crushed in spirit, draw near and comfort us this day. Teach us of Your will concerning Jesus, Your Son, that as You did not send Him into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him, neither did You adopt us as Your children only to abandon us in the time of trial. We give You thanks, rather, that those whom You predestined You also called, justified and will surely glorify. As we rejoice in the certainty of our salvation, we thank You for giving us the same confidence regarding our loved one, _____. During the days that remain of our lives, bless us through Your ageless promise that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

APPENDIX 5

For Further Reading

On depression, mental illness and despair

Hines, Kevin. *Cracked, Not Broken: Surviving and Thriving After a Suicide Attempt*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013.

Suffering from the darkest pits of psychosis, Kevin Hines was convinced he was a burden to his family and had an obligation to die. Looking back on this painful period years later, he reports of his leaping from the Golden Gate Bridge and gives an inspiring account of his determination thereafter to battle his bipolar disorder. Despite the inner voices telling him he must die, and despite his suicide attempt, Hines is able to relate that there is always another option to suicide. His work is a captivating story of survival, facing adversity and living with mental illness.

Karp, David A. *Speaking of Sadness: Depression, Disconnection, and the Meanings of Illness*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.

In this scholarly and personal account of his own excruciating experience with depression, David Karp offers tremendous insight into the life of the depressed. On the one hand, he speaks of the illness's crippling effect on his identity, leading to isolation, despair and thoughts of suicide. On the other hand,

he reveals how the depressed may learn to cope and adapt. Especially helpful are his interviews with 50 other depressed men and women. This book is sure to enhance the understanding of those who live with or care for the depressed.

Peperkorn, Todd A. *I Trust When Dark My Road: A Lutheran View of Depression*. St. Louis: LCMS World Relief and Human Care, 2009.

People with a strong faith, pastors included, are not immune to depression, anxiety and a sense of forsakenness or despair. In this book, Lutheran pastor Rev. Todd Peperkorn takes us on a personal journey, recounting what preceded and precipitated his depression and how it created burdens and difficulties for him in every facet of his life. Relying on his knowledge of God's grace through Jesus, Peperkorn offers hope, perspective and valuable pastoral support for those who are plagued with mental illness and seek spiritual encouragement.

Styron, William. *Darkness Visible: A Memoir of Madness*. New York: Vintage Books, 1990.

In remarkable fashion, William Styron recounts his descent into madness and his story of recovery. Having survived debilitating suicidal depression, he educates readers concerning the pain associated with the illness and how it is incomprehensible to those who have not experienced it in its extreme mode. The anguish he describes is most closely connected to drowning, suffocation — a poisonous fog bank rolling in upon his mind or a pain that crushes the soul. Styron ultimately emerged from his dark hole, and his book provides hope for many others suffering from crushing despair.

On suicide

Joiner, Thomas. *Why People Die by Suicide*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005.

Everyone suffering grief in the wake of a suicide is troubled by questions regarding the death. Why did this happen? What role

do genetics, neurobiology and mental disorders play? How does one become vulnerable to suicide? How might the suicide have been prevented? What about risk assessment and crisis intervention? Thomas Joiner, a clinical psychologist and the son of a suicide, answers an array of questions about suicide, offering an especially clear analysis of *why* people die by suicide.

Preus, Peter. *And She Was a Christian: Why Do Believers Commit Suicide?* Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2011.

It is not simply the degenerate or dysfunctional who commit suicide. My first book about Christians who die by suicide is geared for pastors and church workers. I expose the stigma that has fastened itself to suicide and explain that believers too fall prey to depression, despair and suicide. I also show how Christian leaders can offer support to the grieving by reexamining Scripture's basic teachings regarding sin, grace and Christian faith.

Quinnett, Paul G. *Suicide: The Forever Decision.* New York: Crossroad, 2000.

Paul Quinnett provides a valuable tool both for those who have struggled with suicidal thoughts and those who seek to help them. As a clinical psychologist who has conversed with hundreds of people burdened with thoughts of ending their life, he speaks with great wisdom and empathy. Readers who have suffered from the pain of hopelessness or who have agonized over thoughts of self-destruction will feel Quinnett is speaking directly to them, offering, in a nonjudgmental way, alternatives to suicide.

On grief and Christian suffering

Newman, Michael W. *Hope When Your Heart Breaks: Navigating Grief and Loss.* St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017.

This book is intended for those who've experienced heartbreak and continue to grieve. The Rev. Michael Newman covers a large

spectrum of burdens and challenges confronting the grieving. With a Christ-centered emphasis and pastoral heart, he offers hope to the Christian who suffers from the loss of a loved one. Connecting the reader to various biblical accounts, his book is sure to provide support and strength in a time of mourning.

Norris, Kathleen. *Acedia & me: A Marriage, Monks, and a Writer's Life*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2008.

Whereas some have defined *acedia* (the Latin term for that one of the seven deadly sins more commonly known as “sloth”) as mere laziness, and others have equated the condition with depression, Kathleen Norris reveals that there is a spiritual element behind *acedia*. Referencing her personal battle with *acedia*, Norris speaks of one’s apathy toward life and inability to care. As Norris retraces some of the religious history on this subject, the reader is introduced to the struggles endured by the desert monks, whose efforts at prayer and meditation seemed futile. More than a sin, *acedia* as Norris comes to understand it is a sickness of the soul, treated not by counseling and medication but Christian teaching, prayer and meditation.

Schulz, Gregory P. *The Problem of Suffering: A Father's Hope*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2011.

The Rev. Gregory Schulz assures readers of this book that suffering is not simply being in pain. It is a complaint about the wrongness of the pain. We cry to God to acknowledge and confess that our grief is not right. What God would have us learn despite our suffering, however, is not how we might justify His ways but how He would justify us. Schulz talks openly of his pain as a father, having lost two of his four children to rare and debilitating diseases. He relates to the reader not simply as a father, but as a pastor and theologian. His message is not how to get over our grief, but how to live by God’s grace until He lifts us out of this valley of tears.

Senkbeil, Harold L. *Dying to Live: The Power of Forgiveness*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1994.

As a theologian of the cross, the Rev. Harold Senkbeil demonstrates that although Christians are dying to live, they're dying just the same. The world tries to sugarcoat death, hiding its true cause: our sin. However, the very life it tries to preserve lacks reality. The antidote to our lonely, meaningless life, Senkbeil demonstrates, is to recognize, even in death, that there is life through Jesus Christ. Christ brings life into this dying world through His own death on the cross. *Dying to Live* is sure to offer relief both to one with thoughts of dying and to one who struggles to live in death's aftermath.

Veith, Gene Edward Jr. *The Spirituality of the Cross*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999.

As one who resided for some time outside of orthodox Christianity, Gene Veith can easily identify a message that falls short in comforting the sufferer. Unsurprisingly, his discussion of Christian spirituality is sure to be of great value to the believer who is hurting under the cross of depression and despair. Christianity, Veith professes beautifully, is not about our successful efforts to reach God and be cured of our imperfections. Rather, it is about believing that God descends to us in our weakness and frailties and by His forgiveness makes us whole.



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