

It was a dreary February afternoon when an old friend called me. He wanted to talk about suicide. His wife had recently tidied up the house, swallowed everything in the medicine cabinet, and slashed her wrists and forearms. He was hoping I could explain it all to him, to clear up his confusion and nullify some of his pain. I wanted to say something powerful and profound, but the fact was I had nothing profound to declare.

As a pastor, I can't think of many things I like less than conducting the funeral of a believer who has committed suicide. The paradoxes pile up on top of each other. Do I talk about the providence and sovereignty of God the way I would when talking about the death of a child? That hardly makes sense. Do I talk about the power and presence of God in the midst of suffering? Yes, if I am talking to those attending the funeral. But what about the victim? Was there insufficient grace for this believer? That hardly seems likely. Even the term "suicide victim" is paradoxical. Certainly, the paradox is felt as friends and family eulogize

this believer's love for family and service to Christ. In our hearts, someone must go on trial, but who? The person who cut his life short? We who somehow failed him? Perhaps God or his Word?

The suicide of a Christian is no more tragic than the suicide of an unbeliever, but it is more puzzling. After all, believers are promised new life in Christ and a living hope, while non-Christians do not know Christ and are not indwelt by the Holy Spirit. Yet the worldviews of the suicidally depressed Christian and non-Christian are remarkably similar. The experience of unbearable pain, interpersonal alienation, and hopelessness is similar. The struggle with unmet felt needs and the belief that there are no solutions to their problems is the same. The difference seems to be that non-Christians have no light or truth, and so seek help in what we view as idols, while Christians have light and truth but don't keep their eyes on these things. The paradox is brought into full focus when a suicidal Christian wants to know if she will lose her salvation if she kills herself. The contradiction in her thinking—that the same God who has the power to condemn her eternally doesn't have the power to help her now—seems lost on her.

The thoughts and emotional experiences that lead some to suicide flow from the same spring as the mildest depression. The same biblical truths that explain mild sadness also explain suicide. Having said that, the intention to commit suicide is a crisis that requires us to be familiar with the various indicators that someone plans to take his life. We also need to know how to intervene when someone appears suicidal. I hope to offer some guidelines in this booklet.

The Inner World of the Suicidal Person

Let's begin by describing the thought life and emotions of a suicidal person. But remember that these descriptions are not explanations. Psychological pain, interpersonal alienation, and hopelessness are not the ultimate reasons why someone commits suicide. Though the pain of depression can be suffocating, our wills and our moral values are part of every aspect of our lives. Even when there is a biological component to the depression, our interpretations of our experiences—and our responses to them—are rooted in the thoughts and desires of our hearts. According to the Bible, what finally determines our experiences

and choices is whether we see our lives through the lens of our relationship with Jesus Christ. In that light, we can see that suicide is the act of a sinful heart; it cannot be reduced to psychological experiences.

This can be difficult to remember because of suicide's tragic dimensions. When someone takes his life, we look for ways to explain the choice. It is a mystery to be solved, and the chief witness cannot testify, often leaving few clues. Therefore, we often regard the description as the explanation: "He killed himself because he was hopeless." "She killed herself because she couldn't forgive herself." Too often, however, we fail to penetrate the veil of hopelessness to see a heart that had drifted from the place of truth and peace. In that regard, Berkouwer's observation about sin's fundamental senselessness is appropriate.

Therefore, since every "unriddling" of sin implies a discovery of "sense" where no sense can possibly be found, the very notion of an "unriddling" is impossible. One cannot find sense in the senseless and meaning in the meaningless.

All of this does not imply that sin is any less a power or an influence on re-