

Time of Grace Ministry
I Have a Friend: Who Talks About Suicide
Isaiah 35:1-6
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Pastor Michael Novotny

Welcome to Time of Grace, I'm Pastor Mike Novotny. Some people call it the other "s" word; suicide. Forty-thousand people in America will take their lives every year. Maybe you know one of them? Countless others will attempt the act; maybe you love one of them. And how many hundreds of thousands, if not millions of others, will think about those dark thoughts?

So what do you say if you have a friend who's thinking about taking their own life? Today, Pastor Mark Jeske is going to dive into that sensitive question: What do we do? He's going to remind us that God sends us, as family and friends, on the holy, sacred, and important mission to give life to those who are thinking about taking their own.

Pastor Mark Jeske

Genealogical research has never been easier and some of you, perhaps, have had the fun of digging into the web to find out about your own family or maybe you buy a subscription to ancestry.com and you go digging around in there. You might even find some family pictures you did not know existed.

One of my little hobbies that I was digging around on last week was looking up the story of the house that I live in. You know, Carol and I live in a real old house; it was built in 1880. It's across the street from Glorioso's. And I was kind of curious, you know, like who built it? Was there an architect of record? Who were the people who constructed it? Can we find the name of the construction contractor? And who were the first people to live in it?

Now with a building that old, our state historical society actually has a file on my house and they call it the W.W. Wallis house – w-a-l-l-i-s. But I was curious who is this guy? Who is W.W. Wallis? I did find the name of the architect, and found the name of the construction company and now I'm curious who's W.W. Wallis? Well, the early city directories list him as a bookkeeper but then they also list him as the manager of the Goodyear rubber store. The Goodyear rubber store? Hmm, this is in the 1880s. This is pre-automobile; there weren't any tires then.

Well, let me tell you, today if I say Goodyear, you immediately think, "Well, tires. Duh. That's what they do is sell high-end tires." Well, Goodyear was in existence long before tires and they sold anything made of rubber – this brand new, cool invention called golashes, boots – that's where you'd go to buy them. You'd go to the Goodyear rubber store to buy boots. Or completely waterproof raincoats which had a thin layer that were rubberized so it would shed water. Everything you could imagine having to do with rubber, that's what Goodyear would sell

and W.W. Wallis happened to be the manager of the Goodyear store and he hanged himself in 1913.

I don't know if I'm going to tell Carol and the kids because I don't want them getting creeped out so I'm not certain of which years he lived in our house. And I don't want them having nightmares about coming into some room of the house and seeing a body swinging from the light fixture. And I'm not kidding when I say that; I'm totally serious.

You know, one of the reasons I like to read about history is that I have nostalgia for a past that seems gone, that seems better, than the mess we have to live in today. You ever get one of those emails from a friend of the good old days where you see ads of a gentler, quieter time when everything seemed safer, there wasn't so much crazy violence, people were nicer to each other, everything seemed so much better. Well, I'm here to tell you that the past wasn't so nice and safe. Just think of W.W. Wallis swinging from his self-made noose. His life was so miserable he felt he couldn't take another day of it. It's been my sad duty to perform the funerals for two of our members who took their own lives. It's hard to talk about suicide. This may be your first ever Sunday morning suicide message. It's painful. It's stressful. It's not happy talk at all. And yet, let's get real: We have to talk about this because you and I might be in a position to talk somebody off a ledge and you don't know when that will happen and you might be very surprised to know who among your friends are fantasizing even now about ending everything.

Do you know that 40,000 Americans a year take their own lives? Ten times that many attempt it. And ten times that many are thinking about it and wishing they were dead. Ask any psychiatrist or counselor or psychologist and they will talk to you that underneath the surface – even of somebody who seems reasonably well-dressed – there might be total chaos and misery inside their head.

Think how shocked Jesus' disciples were to find out that Judas was so overcome by his unworthiness that he could not bear to live even one day longer. Who knew? Did anybody talk to the guy? He was caught up in his own bad choices but that doesn't mean that there was no mercy for him. In fact, it's even a little bit of an insult for someone to say, "My sin, Lord, is too big for you to forgive. I am too evil for you ever to clean up. I am too unworthy for your mercy. My sin is bigger than you are." It's kind of a form of selfishness and people who are so miserable that they want to stop everything in their life are also giving very little, if any, thought to the terrible devastation that their act is going to have on the people around them who now have to live with those miserable memories. A child who had to hear the gunshot. A spouse who had to see the horrible mess. The poor soul who comes into a room to see a body swinging. They are changed forever and will have nightmares for the rest of their lives from that sad scene.

But suicide is all around us and suicidal thoughts are all around us, as well. Do you know what some group of Americans are particularly vulnerable to taking their own lives? The military. Do you know that just about once an hour every day, every week, every month, every year a veteran kills himself. You know people who are depressed and depression – everybody struggles with some form of depression. Everybody has slumps, emotional slumps, where all the joy of life seems to be gone. You know that; don't even look so shocked at me. You know that you have felt those moods. Some of you have been in some pretty deep troughs and some of you

know that if it were not for the antidepressant medication that you need to take, you would have trouble getting from one day to the next.

For some people, even normal counseling and a bit of medication is not enough and you and I are an important part of God's encouragement team and I have some words for you from Isaiah today that are first of all for you, because you are wounded, as well. We're not just talking about some other people; I fully expect that there are some pretty suicidal people within the sound of my voice right now and we don't know quite who they are because it's so shameful. It's so horrible to have to admit and when there has been a suicide, it's the evil you can't talk about. People cover it up and you may have even been to a funeral that was a suicide but nobody says anything and you just thought it was a death.

There are all kinds of different ways to kill yourself other than just taking a gun and blowing off the top of your head. Some people commit suicide by getting in their car and they kill themselves with their automobile and it's written up as an accident – the police report says it was an accident – but God and the angels know that the person did some terribly recklessly dangerous things in order to try to take their own life. So I want you to be ready with something to say when you encounter someone you know or love who is on the ledge, who's miserable, and says things like "I just don't want to live anymore. I hate my life."

Let's go to the prophet Isaiah who lived himself in an extremely stressful time. I'd like you to go to chapter thirty-five. It was Isaiah's sad duty to watch the northern 75 percent of the people in the land of Israel disintegrate as a nation. They were going to lose their national existence. You know, unlike our civil war, the civil war at that time succeeded with the rebellion and the northern half cracked away. There was a north and a south permanently. And the north was under severe pressure by the invading Assyrian Empire. And although he may not have known it at first, they were going to prevail and the entire northern kingdom was broken up, their armies defeated, their usable manpower deported and planted farther east to try to break this nation of its independence. I'm pretending I'm Isaiah watching my country collapse. Militarily collapse, economically, everything steal-able was taken. What they didn't feel like stealing they burned, leaving behind just a charred-over wreck and Isaiah had to watch that and the worst thing is this was supposed to be the people of God. It made people question everything. Very gloomy time to be Jewish in Isaiah's time and yet, here's a message God gave him to say to people who really felt like giving up; like there's no hope anymore.

Chapter 35 – here's a metaphor for barrenness: "The desert, the parched land will be glad. The wilderness will rejoice and blossom." There's nothing essentially evil about a desert. In fact, some of you like deserts. In fact, some of you can't wait to get away from the northern tundra in January and February and you run to the desert. As long as you get enough water, you love that sunshine because you don't have to shovel. But if you're trying to live in a place with no water, life is very hard. This is not ripping on the desert landscape, for God made that, too. What it's saying is that when your life feels like a desert, when you just can hardly go on, your throat is so parched, you want some water, anything. You don't feel like doing anything, you will be glad.

Areas where farming is impossible will blossom. "Like the crocus, it will burst into bloom. It will rejoice greatly and shout for joy. The glory of Lebanon will be given to it." These days,

Lebanon is not exactly a place where people are eager to go on a tourist cruise but back in the day, Lebanon was the only place in that part of the world where there was enough rainfall and proper soil where big trees could grow. Lebanon had forests. There are no forests in Israel. It's semi-arid. Much of Israel looks more like Arizona than the north woods of Wisconsin. So Lebanon is a metaphor for fertility and growth, adequate water, and beauty of nature. "The splendor of Carmel will be given to it." Carmel was a tall mountain peak right on the Mediterranean where Elijah had his showdown with the prophets of Baal. Tremendous view; million dollar views from up there; you can see the whole Eastern Mediterranean. "Sharon," is one of the most fertile places because there's water there. Unfortunately, a lot of it in biblical times was swampy but today, in the land of Israel, that flat land along the Mediterranean is the most fertile part of their farm-based economy and, "they will see the glory of the Lord, the splendor of our God."

Wouldn't you love to see the glory of the Lord? If it's you out on the ledge, wouldn't you like to see that you're special? Wouldn't you like to see that God loves you? And yet, the Scripture tells us our life is hidden in Christ. We have to imagine realities that right now are invisible. You don't look like sons and daughters of God; you look real ordinary to me and I look real ordinary to you. You could put me inside any business and I would just look like an accountant or a lawyer, right? I look so ordinary. When I'm in my t-shirt and jeans, I don't even look like a lawyer; I just look like some working guy. When your life is painful, when your heart has no hope, you feel parched and the promises of God are what puts hope in you and to help you imagine what really is happening, what's really going on between you and God, and what is going to happen, to imagine the future – here's what Isaiah says: "Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way. Say to those with fearful hearts, 'Be strong, do not fear. Your God will come.'"

These are words of encouragement for broken people whose bodies have been broken, who limp, who are blind, who are deaf, who are mute, who have trouble functioning because something in their body is broken but who also may be broken inside. And for every person you see with a physical disability, there are just as many people with emotional and mental disabilities that cripple them up and Satan laughs and howls because every one of those is an opportunity for him to stick in that crack, to stick his pry bar in and start yanking around to try to crack off your confidence in God.

Last week I talked to you about how he uses sexual temptation as an endless ploy to try to break people away from God to manipulate their sexual desires into lust and cause them to break their marriage vows or to live in adultery. Satan also takes your basic insecurity and the wounds that you have in your body and in your mind and he will whisper to you: "What a loser you are. What a fool you are. How ugly you are. How worthless you are. How unlovable you are. You've got nothing. You have no friends. You're stupid. You've accomplished nothing of any value and worth. Nobody cares about you if you lived or died. In fact, you should just jump right now and end it all."

When that gets whispered to you week after week, you start to believe it. You and I first can practice this kind of gospel self-talk on ourselves and say, "Be gone, Satan." Those are lies. I am precious to my God. The Son of God died for me. How valuable he must think I am! Worth

going through that – not for his own sake – he got nothing out of that except the pleasure of having me live with him in eternity. Don't tell me I'm a guilty fool. I've been pardoned and forgiven by God's son himself. His blood has washed me cleaner than clean. I am as holy as Jesus Christ himself in the eyes of God. Don't tell me I'm a loser. I'm a winner for being connected to Christ in faith, I participate with him in his triumphant resurrection and ascension. And my eternity, my destiny, has risen and ascended with Christ and is already in heaven. My life is hidden with him but it's with him and soon in just a little while, if I just hang on, I am going to be with Christ where he lives right now. He's coming for me and, "I will see the glory of the Lord, the splendor of our God."

So when my hands get shaky – and this isn't talking just about arthritis or you got the tremors or Tourette's or some kind of thing that makes me shake – steady the knees that give way. That's not just losing all the cartilage in your knee joints. This also is talking about your self-confidence in life and your feeling of self-worth. "Strengthen those feeble hands." Mark, steady your feeble knees when they're shaking.

"Say to those with fearful hearts," and I say it to you so that you may say it to other people in your life who are on the ledge: "Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with a vengeance." Satan's doomed with divine retribution. "He will come to save you." When Jesus Christ died, it might have looked like the nails were being driven into him and he loses, but what actually was happening was by allowing those evil people to crucify him, he was killing Satan's ability to drag you into hell forever and Satan was given a mortal wound on Calvary. Satan now is gasping and dying and knows his destiny in hell is certain and he's trying to have some company by dragging you down with him and getting you to despair and give up, as he persuaded Judas to despair and give up. It's actually really selfish to think like that because you're telling God my evil is too great for you.

But I invite you to gather around the foot of Jesus' cross and thank him that since it was the blood of God being shed, it is greater than any moral sin you've ever committed and this is the first message you can bring to somebody who's on the ledge is their own feeling of being worthless, the shame in their past, the guilt they feel, is all washed away and God looks at it no more. And he has separated them from those bad things as far as east is from west and simply announced unconditional forgiveness. Announced unconditional love to people; that God loves you not based on your performance but because of a decision he made to see and find value in you. Not to grade your tests to see if you pass or fail but he chooses to give you the dignity of receiving his mercy. And God is not interested in your past or any of the messes because there's an abundance of mercy and forgiveness that covers it all. He's interested in right now and going forward. He's interested more in our tomorrows than our yesterdays.

"Then will the eyes of the blind be opened, the ears of the deaf unstopped. The lame will leap like a deer, the tongue of the dumb shout for joy." When you feel like you're in a desert, like everything good in life's been cut off from you, when we finally are in the presence of Jesus, we'll be transformed. We'll see colors. We'll hear music. We'll be dancing and we'll be communicating with each other. All of these limitations and restrictions that cripple us and hobble us right now will vanish and we will be made whole in our bodies but in our minds, too;

no longer will we be crippled up with self-doubt, with self-hatred, with thinking there is no hope left for me.

So that's another powerful message to bring to people is that there is hope. You don't have to pretend like oh, your past is nothing or your pain is nothing, get over it. Acknowledge the reality of it and listen to people and let them feel like there is somebody who cares. They will be more likely to believe that there's a God in heaven who cares about them if they can see God through you. And you pay attention and listen and you take their suicide talk seriously. A lot of people with a gun that people didn't know about had talked about it, had done that suicide talk, and people blew it off and said, "Oh, don't talk silly like that. That's just silly." They meant it and they go home and they take that gun out and they slide a bullet in a chamber and they think about pulling the trigger. Believe them. Believe people and listen to them when they have desperation talk. And open your heart and carry some of their pain and don't minimize it. Let them dump the bag and tell you how miserable they are and don't say, "Oh, that's nothing." Or, "If you really want to hear some problems, let me tell you about mine."

Let them feel valued. Give them your attention and your face. Announce God's unconditional love. His mercy of forgiveness for all of their own sins. Accept and acknowledge the reality of their struggle but urge them to hang on by giving them hope that when the Lord Jesus returns, he's going to heal us all and make all things right and make all things well. And in this way, you and I can be the hug of God, the embrace of God, the valuing and smile and kind words of God. The affirming talk of God. The message of God that they have value and they can hang on just a little bit longer and we will see the glory of the Lord and the splendor of our God. Let's see how God may choose to use us for the people in our lives who are miserable, full of self-hatred. Let us speak these words first to ourselves and really believe it that God thinks us that valuable and then share that good news in our lives. May God give you strength.

Pastor Michael Novotny

Earlier this year, the internet was abuzz with a controversial new show. A show about a young high school student who took her own life and then told the world 13 reasons why she did it. Controversy swirled about whether this show was good for young people in America, whether it would open our eyes to the reasons that people take that final step, or maybe inspire them to do the same.

Now whether you've seen the show or not or whether you love it or hate it or somewhere in between, today God wants us to remember that we can be a reason for a person to live. The truth is, we never know what people are going through; we never understand the thoughts in their hearts and in their heads. And so the Apostle Paul's words to us in Ephesians 4 where he says, "Don't let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouth but only what's helpful for building others up that it may benefit those who listen."

You never know how powerful your words might be. The Old Testament says that our words have the power of life and death. So speak life and give hope and tell people about the greatest reason to live: God's incredible grace.

Let's pray: Gracious Father, you are the giver of life and you promise us that every life has meaning. You tell us that even when we are in the pit of despair and walking through the valley of the shadow of death, you are with us. You promise us even when life is difficult and we don't see any solutions that we can have hope because you have plans for us, God. Plans to give us hope and to give us a future.

We pray for faith, God, that when we can't see the answers that you would help us to believe that there are answers. And we pray for love for the people all around us. Lord, you know the burdens that they're carrying. You know the plans that they've devised in their heart and you know how powerful our words can be. God, help us to speak kind words, compassionate words, understanding words. Help us to care about other people's lives; that life could be lived in all of its fullness as Jesus intended. We put all these things in his powerful and beautiful name, Amen.

For Time of Grace, I'm Pastor Mike Novotny and it all starts now.