

Time of Grace Ministry
Culture Collision: 13 Reasons Why Not
1 John 1:9; Jeremiah 29:11
January 28, 2018

Pastor Mark Jeske

One of the painful realities of the world that we live in - and yet, one so very hard to talk about - is the issue of suicide. Thousands, hundreds of thousands of people, perhaps even millions of people, are sad and depressed and wished they were dead; we need to take this seriously. We also need to know what to say when members of our family or friends are really struggling with some major depression.

Pastor Mike Novotny is going to take us into God's word to look for insights and help so that we, first of all, can fuel up on God's love and encouragement for us but also to give us words to know what to say to our loved ones and friends when they are going through deep periods of depression.

Pastor Michael Novotny

Before the National Association of School Psychologists warned America that it was a dangerous show, I watched all 13 episodes of the controversial Netflix series "13 Reasons Why." Have you seen it? If not, it's the story of a teenage girl named Hannah Baker who takes her own life; she commits suicide. But before she does, she records audio tapes to let her classmates and her city know all the reasons why she did it.

We don't often talk about suicide. It's uncomfortable, it's emotional; it's not like during the meet and greet before the start of church you turn to the person next to you and say, "Hey, I'm suicidal. How's your day?" We don't talk about things like that in church and maybe that's part of the problem because if we don't talk about it, we can't help each other. If we don't talk about it in God's house, then all we're left with are rumors and lies and suspicions with questions like: If you commit suicide, do you lose out on eternity? Do you punch a one-way ticket to hell? You didn't have time to repent and you have to be repentant to be in heaven, right?

If you'd open your Bible and read from cover to cover today, you would learn that there are five suicides that happened in the Bible; four in the Old Testament and one in the New. So what do we learn from those five stories? We learn, first, that suicide happens for lots of reasons. In King Saul's case, it might be a fear that life is only going to get worse. In fact, it might get terrible and we want to end it before it gets there. Suicides then are like suicides now and they happen for so many reasons but other people would read those stories and they would add something. They would say, "Well, what we can learn from those five stories is that if you commit suicide you cannot be saved." From what we can tell, these five stories are of unbelieving people; they didn't have hope, they didn't have faith in God, they didn't trust his plan, and so they gave up; they had nothing to live for. You see, people would say, if you commit suicide it's because you don't have God; you have a lack of faith.

Do you think that's true? Is that a good interpretation of what we find in the Bible? Well, to answer that question, you need to know the difference between a description and a prescription. Have you ever learned that principle about interpreting God's word? A description is just something that is described in the Bible; it's not God saying it's always this way or always that, this is right and this is wrong. It's just a simple description of what happened. "Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River," is a description; it's not God telling you you have to be baptized in the Jordan River. But "be baptized; keep this command," that's a prescription, where God is prescribing and telling us exactly what to do, what's right, and what's wrong. And when we look at these five stories, we find out that these are not prescriptions; there's no passage that says this goes to prove that every suicide is a lack of faith. It's just the description of what happened to these five men.

Now what we need to answer the question about suicides and eternity is a passage that would say, "This is a sin of unbelief; a sin that someone can commit only if they lack faith." Can you think of a passage that says that in God's word? Pastor Kurt Ebert cares about the answer to that question. He was in the office downstairs working when he heard the gunshot and he scrambled to the foot of the stairs and there was his son, Nathan, clutching his chest from a self-inflicted wound. "I'm sorry, dad," he cried out. "I love God. I'm sorry." And he died.

Is he in heaven or is he in hell? The apostle John can answer that question. It says in 1 John 1: "If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us," – catch this word – "from all unrighteousness." Isn't that an amazing word? "All" unrighteousness. There's no asterisk, "except for suicide." Suicide is unrighteousness; it is sin and it is a sin that Jesus purified when he gave his life on the cross. He died for doubt, he died for despair, he died for murderers, and yes, he died for suicides. And that's why pastor got up at Nathan's funeral and preached that. Seven hundred family members and friends confused, wondering where Nathan was, gathered and the pastor's theme that day was this: He did what?

Part one: He did what? Nathan shot himself? The pastor's son? A Christian killed himself? He did what? "Yeah, he did that," the pastor said. Part two: He did what? Jesus did what? He died for those who cause their own death? He forgives the sin of suicide? He purifies us from all unrighteousness, even that unrighteousness? Pastor said, "Amen." And that young man is with Jesus because suicide is not a one-way ticket to hell. But, but, but, but, but – some would object – "But pastor, doesn't the passage say 'if'" I'll read it again: "If we confess our sins, God is faithful and will forgive us." And not every suicide is like Nathan's; not every person has a chance to say "I'm sorry. I love God. I shouldn't have done this." What happens if you pull the trigger? If you jump and there's not time to say sorry to God? That's a good question. It's the most common response I hear when we talk about suicide in the church. "Well, Pastor, you have to be repentant and some people don't have time to repent. So what about that?"

Well, let's test that logic for just a second. Let's imagine when you leave church here today, you're in a car with a family member or a friend and you get into an argument. And you're being kind of stubborn and you're being defensive and just when you're digging in your heels and about to fire back, smash! The car barrels through the intersection and you die. Are you in

heaven or hell? You didn't have time to repent. Now obviously, no, to be repentant doesn't mean you verbalize every sin. To be repentant means if there's a struggle in your heart, whether you have time to say it or not. And is it possible that at the moment someone makes that fatal choice that they can't take back, that there's a struggle in their heart? And the answer is absolutely.

You see, we have to understand the difference between faith and faith. Do you know the difference between Faith with a capital "F" and faith with a small "f"? Faith with a capital "F" is faith in Jesus; that I believe that I am right with God, I'm reconciled with him. By pure grace and mercy, it's all about Jesus. But small "f" faith is trust in the promises of God. I'm not going to worry because God's got this and he's going to take care of this. Now, I would bet for those of us who are Christians, we have capital "F" Faith but have we ever lacked small "f" faith? Ever worry about your finances? Your health? How something's going to work out? You know the difference then. And it's very possible – in fact, it happens all the time – that a Christian who has capital "F" Faith in the moment loses hope. In the struggle with sin, they lose sight of small "f" faith and they make the choice. And so, I want to tell you today that despite all the rumors and all the mystery and all the taboo, that suicide is a damaging sin, it is unrighteousness, it is destructive but it is not unforgiveable. It does not separate us eternally from the grace of God. He purifies us from all unrighteousness.

Martin Luther agreed with that. Did you know in the early centuries of the Christian church, God-fearing people were taking their own lives all the time by choice? It became a fad, actually, that you would be baptized and then commit suicide so you can see Jesus faster. There was a great church father named Augustus who said, "No." He wanted to stop it; he knew it was wrong. And he said, "No, if you commit suicide, you're done." That wasn't in the Bible but he was trying to stop the flood of self-inflicted harm and so the rumor persisted and persisted and persisted and thank God, Martin Luther saw that that wasn't true. In fact, one of his students was taking notes when he was kind of rifling it at a meal and Martin Luther said this. He said, "I don't share the opinion that suicides are certainly to be damned. However, this ought not to be taught to the common people lest Satan be given an opportunity to kill." It's an interesting quote, isn't it? So Luther would say "Amen!" to what I just preached to you, but he would also say, "But Mike, you shouldn't preach that." And you see his reasoning. I mean, if you came into church today and you're deeply depressed and you have no hope and you could be in heaven by tonight, why wouldn't you? Maybe the certainty of heaven instead of the damnability of hell is just one more reason why you would do it.

And so, I want to give you something better today. I want to give you a reason why not. No, scratch that. Today, I want to give you 13 reasons why not. So grab your Bibles, hold onto your pews, because we start with reason one: That God has a plan for you. Often in the pit of depression and despair, we assume that there is no plan; this is pointless and the suffering will never change. But have you ever heard that coffee cup favorite Christian verse? "I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord." Do you know who wrote that? A severely depressed follower of God. Jeremiah was called the weeping prophet. In fact, at one time in the book of Jeremiah, he asked, "Why did I ever come out of the womb?" which is a depressing question. He saw no point to his life. There was no plan. And yet, God didn't just use him to write a book

of the Bible; God used him to write one of the most famous passages that has inspired the hopeless for thousands of years. And the same is true for us. You might not know the plan and I might not know the plan but God has a plan. He will use you. In fact, he will use this because he knows the plans he has to give you hope and to give you a future.

Reason number two: Because this pain will pass. Pastor Rick Warren is the pastor of one of America's largest churches but all that ministry success did not stop his son from taking his own life. After Matthew's suicide, the pastor made a video where he pleaded with people who were considering making the same choice as his son and he said, "Don't. Because emotions are like waves. You feel so dark and so hopeless but just like a wave that feels like it's drowning you passes and crashes over your head, this pain will, too." Emotions don't last forever; they can't last forever. So hold on. Light is coming in the morning. Blessing is coming with the promises of God.

Reason number three: Because we would love to meet the real you. In his book, "And She Was a Christian," Pastor Peter Preus tells the story of his wife's suicide. She succeeded not on her first attempt but on her second and his church had no idea that she was sick, depressed, delusional. When he got up and prayed for his church family, they never prayed for her because what would the people think? What would they say if the pastor's family was going through that and they were shocked to find out the day she did it.

I hope we don't have churches like that. I hope church is a place that you can come to when it is messy and messed up. When people come to my church for the new member meeting – you know, sit down in the pastor's office – do you know what I tell them? I say, when you do something that is shockingly bad and embarrassing and shameful and you want to crawl in a hole, I want you to come here, first. And you're going to hesitate to say it and then you're going to spill it and you're going to cry on this couch because here's what I'm going to say as soon as you close your mouth: You know that God loves you, right? The church is not a place where we heave guilt on people's messes. It's a place where we have grace and mercy and the promises of God and so I want you to know that we would love to meet the real you. In fact, I feel closest to the people who are messed up at my church; it makes me feel better like I'm not the only one. So what if your church was a place where you can make a call, where you can reach out, and people would not take a step back in judgment but a step forward in grace?

Reason number four: Because suicide is sin. You shall not murder, God commanded, and he was thinking about the murder of self, too. You are not your own; you were bought at a price, the apostle Paul wrote. And so, life is not ours to give or to take. God knit us together in our mother's wombs and, therefore, our lives belong to him. Our best lives and our worst lives, the peaks and the valleys, the lives that seem to lack quality, all belongs to God. It's in his hands and he gets to decide when it ends.

Reason five: Because suicide is selfish. All the stories of suicide that I've read were not of people who wanted to end their lives; they wanted to end their pain. They believed things like this world would be better without me. I'm a burden to my family and friends. It's going to be easier for them if I take my own life. But I can tell you the opposite is true. And the worst part

of watching that show was when Hannah's mom walked into the bathroom. And she did not end pain in this world; she compounded it. And so, you might hate yourself but I bet you love them – your friends, your family – and this will not ease their burden. It will leave them with questions that they maybe never will answer: Why did this happen? What didn't I see? What did I do wrong? Suicide's not just sinful; it's selfish.

Reason number six: Because Jesus knows. You ever feel so overwhelmed, so sorrowful, so close to death that no one gets it? Have you ever felt so in the pit, that you're so desperate for people to be with you because it's not safe to be by yourself? Do you know who knows exactly how that feels? Jesus. You remember in the garden, the night before he dies, what he says? "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here with me." And so when you're in that valley and it seems like no one gets it, I want you to pray to Jesus because he doesn't shake his head and furrow his brow; he nods and says, "I know. I know."

Reason number seven: Because I need you. I have battled a lot of temptation and a lot of struggles in my life but I've never battled this. And so, I need you. I need you to live and I need you to share and I need you to help make church better. There are depressed and suicidal people who show up every Sunday and I'm never going to be able to connect with them, to reach them, to understand them, without you. One of the best parts of preparing for this very message was talking to people who've thought about it, who've even attempted it, to learn from their stories. I need you to be a better pastor. Your pastor needs you to have a better church.

Number eight: Because we need you. You might feel worthless, you might feel depressed, you might feel hopeless but the Bible says this: Those parts of the body of Christ that seem to be weaker are indispensable. You know what you might be like? You might be like that muscle in your body that you don't know exists until you pull it. Ever happen to you? You try a new activity like, "I don't even know what's sore, but that hurts!" And you realize there's something you didn't know existed but you needed it.

I think some of God's depressed sons and daughters are just like that; they don't know what their role is, they don't know what their purpose is. They go through the motions and they think the world wouldn't even miss me if I was gone. But like that muscle, we would. You're an indispensable part. God uniquely wired and gifted and placed you in the time and place where you live for a reason.

Reason number nine: Because they need you. And maybe it's just me, but I think the Christian church has a bit of a PR problem these days. Lots of people think that the church is for good people who wear nice dresses and suits and polished shoes and if you're depressed and suicidal and you have a problem with pills and clinical depression you don't belong there. So maybe – maybe – God could use you to reach them. Maybe your story would be the one to prove, hey, you can be suicidal and saved. You can be depressed and you can go every Sunday. You can struggle with this and you will be loved and welcomed and not judged. Maybe God's plan is to use you in that struggle to reach them for his glory and for their good.

Reason number ten: Because God is with you. Maybe you've considered suicide because your ex isn't with you. Because you lost a baby and the child isn't with you. Because you lost your reputation; you lost your job; you lost your wealth. You have lost so much; it's not with you anymore. But you know who is? Jesus. "He is close to the brokenhearted," the psalms say. "I will never leave you. I will never forsake you." You feel completely alone in the dark. If you could just turn on the light of faith, you'd see him because God is always with you.

Reason eleven: Because God forgives you. You know the saddest thing to me about the story of Judas? Is that Jesus would have forgiven him. If he could have waited just two days and gathered with all of his shame and guilt in the upper room, do you know what would have happened? Jesus would have looked him in the eye with all the other bozos and said, "Peace. Peace, I give to you. For you, Peter, the denier. And you, Judas, the betrayer." The blood of Jesus purifies us from all unrighteousness. And I don't know what you did that makes you feel ashamed or embarrassed, wanting to run and hide, but I do know this: That when Jesus died on the cross and he said, "It is finished," he thought of that, too.

Reason number twelve: Because God has got you. When King David was in the pit of despair, he cried out this: "My times are in God's hands." Whatever that situation is that is making you feel that way – maybe it's slipping through your fingers – but you know what's underneath your fingers? The hands of God and nothing slips through. The situation is underneath the feet of Jesus; it is in his hands and he promises to use it in ways that if you could just see them for one second, they would blow your mind.

And finally, most importantly, reason thirteen: Because God loves you. I know depression isn't logical, I know you might not believe me when I say it, but if there's one thing I want you to remember when you leave here today is that God loves you. If you're a mess, God loves you. If you have it all together, God loves you. If you've never thought for a second about suicide, God loves you. And if you thought about it – before you came to church – God loves you. Neither angels nor demons nor the present nor the future, there's nothing in all of creation, Romans 8 says, that can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus. So you can cry and you can curl up and you can hold the pills in your hands but I want you to remember this – that you are dearly and deeply loved by God himself.

Thirteen reasons to live. And if you would let me preach for another hour, I'd give you a 113 more. Up in Green Bay, Wisconsin where I'm from, a few years ago a woman tried to jump off a bridge. Her husband knew she was attempting it; she was speeding, weaving through traffic trying to get there and he called it in to the police station, panicked. And an officer sped through town to try to catch her. He saw the car when she parked. He rolled up behind her, she got out and ran, and she jumped to the bridge and just before it was too late, he reached out and grabbed her and pulled her to safety. She later came to faith in Jesus.

Maybe today, the Holy Spirit is reaching out for you. And you're so close, you're so close; you're ready to jump but here is the hand of God, the hand of Jesus, pierced to prove his love for you and he says, "No, no, no. Don't." You might have 13 reasons why; I have thousands of reasons why not.

So brothers and sisters, choose life because Jesus gave his life for you and he has a great life for you. Amen.

Pastor Mark Jeske

Suicide is the problem you just can't talk about; there is so much fear and so much shame. If a family has had a suicide within the members of the family, they can hardly talk about it; it hurts so much and they're so embarrassed. The people just sort of disappear and you can't ask.

Perhaps you know also that in this day and age, military suicide is a real problem and it just doesn't seem to want to get reduced. People are struggling with feelings of sadness, disappointment that they just cannot overcome. That's where you and I come in. As Christians, we have the opportunity, first of all, to receive unconditional love and God's mercy and favor on us; to build up our self-confidence and drive out Satan's ugly temptations. But the Holy Spirit, through the word, will also give us words to say so that you and I can bring encouragement and comfort to people that we know are struggling with depression.

You know, I have just enough of my own self-doubts and low feelings sometimes that I don't know if I feel adequate all the time to help somebody else who's really in a pit; who might be thinking of ending his or her own life. So I'd like to pray for some help right now from the Lord and I invite you to pray along with me.

Lord Jesus,

I ask you to give me the comfort of your assurance of forgiveness for all my sins today. Speak to me through your word; encourage me with other Christians around me. Help me know that you love me, help me know that my past is washed away and I have a bright future with you. Build me up when Satan tries to tear me down. But also, I pray for your wisdom so that I will know what to say to someone else who's struggling with serious, major depression. I would like to be your instrument to help someone to avert a suicide. But I also pray for the courage to speak when I need to. Help me, Lord Jesus, for I pray in your name, Amen.

For Time of Grace, I'm Pastor Mark Jeske.



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Culture Collision: 13 Reasons Why Not

1 John 1:9 “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”

Jeremiah 29:11: “‘I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the LORD, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.’”

Points to Ponder

1. What was your view of suicide before today’s message?
2. Read 1 John 1:9. When this passage says that God will forgive us from “all unrighteousness,” does it say anything about suicide being excluded?
3. Does being repentant mean you verbalize and confess every sin or that there’s a struggle going on in your heart?
4. According to Pastor Mike, what is the difference between capital “F” Faith and small “f” faith?
5. Which of the “13 Reasons Why Not” struck you as especially powerful? How might you use that reason with a suicidal friend?

Suicide is not a topic we talk about often in church—though it affects many of us. If we don't talk about it though, how can we help each other? What does God say about it? The Netflix series *13 Reasons Why* thrust suicide into the cultural conversation. This message explains why Christians are tempted by suicide, what the Bible says about suicide, and gives 13+ reasons why we should live to the end of our God ordained time of grace.

What else does God say?

Proverbs 3:5,6: Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.

1 Timothy 6:12 Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses.