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THE HERALD

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Is Someone You Love Suicidal?

The following is taken from a transcript of the Truth in Love Podcast, (episode 96) by Heath Lambert

Life is precious. God makes human beings in his image and gives them souls that never die. Each life, because of that theological and biblical truth, is of inestimable worth and should be honored as such. In a fallen world we disregard life; what we call at the “edges” of life with abortion, with euthanasia – but we also disregard life sometimes in our very own lives as people who are struggling with difficulty seek to end their own life. We would like to discuss how we can recognize whether someone we know or love is at risk of suicide. It’s an important issue to observe for a couple of different reasons, not the least of which is because everybody – all of us – will be sad at some point or another. Discouragement is a common malady of the soul. We all go through times of darkness and difficulty. Yet not every period of darkness and difficulty is the period where someone is at risk of the kind of despair that would result in them ending their life.

As we interact with our loved ones and our body of believers and family and our circle of friends, we as Christians have a responsibility to recognize when someone has crossed the line from what we might call a normal or understandable or even acceptable level of discouragement to a kind of despair that could lead them to take their own life. As we try to understand the warning signs of suicide, let’s pay attention to Scripture and see how we ought to recognize a suicide risk in biblical categories.

We read about a number of suicides in Scripture. We read about Abimelek in Judges 9:54, who had a stone dropped on his head and shamed by a report of being killed by women. In order to avoid that he ordered that he would be put to death. He was run through of his own command. We read about Ahithophel in 2 Samuel 17:23, who when his counsel was not followed, set his house in order and put himself to death. We read about Zimri a king in ancient Israel (1 King 16:18), who when he saw he lost a battle killed himself. There is, of course, the most notorious account of suicide in the Bible with Judas’ killing of himself.

We can look at any one of those examples and receive a lot of meaningful help on this issue. I want to focus on Saul’s suicide. In 1 Samuel 31 we read that Saul was in battle.

In verse 3, it says the battle went heavily against Saul and the archers hid him and he was badly wounded by the archers. Then Saul said to his armor-bearer, “Draw your sword and pierce me through with it, otherwise these uncircumcised will come and pierce me through and make sport of me.” But his armor bearer would not do it, so Saul took his sword and fell on it. We see here Saul’s execution of himself in the midst of battle.

This account like the other accounts mentioned, point us to some indicators of suicide. We see here that Saul has gone through difficult periods of life before but never until this point has that difficulty moved to the category of “I want to die”. As we see this happen in the life of Saul, we can see some warning signs in the life of those we love.

Warning Signs

First warning sign: Saul has a specific reason to die. He is looking around at his situation and he sees something that makes him despair. In this particular situation, he does not want his uncircumcised enemies, these people who are not Israelites, to come and desecrate his body and kill him. He wants to die at his own hand. You will notice that this specific reason to die in this account and in so many other accounts in Scripture has to do with his reputation. He worried about what people thought of him and what would become of his image.

People who are suicidal will have a specific reason they want to die, and very often that connects to their reputation. It’s a very self-focused reason. We are going to want to listen carefully to people because they have a specific reason they want to die or are specifically caught up in their own reputation

of being self-focused.

A second theme we can see with regard to warning signs for a risk of suicide is hopelessness- the specific reason you want to die leads to despair. It leads to hopelessness without the ability to see a way out. “The only exit sign I can find is my own death”; so we are listening to people who have no hope. There is nothing but despair. All options seem to have ended and there is no other recourse. When we are listening to and talking with people who have no hope, we become concerned that their discouragement has moved to despair that could be deadly.

A third warning sign is a destructive behavior. They have a specific reason they want to die; often surrounding their reputation and it is self-focused that moves them to hopelessness and despair and they engage in destructive behavior. We see an example of Saul’s destructive behavior here; he looks at his sword bearer and says, “I want you to kill me”. He is acting in a way before his death that is showing utter disregard for his own life. We want to look for that in the lives of those we love. Are they doing things that show disregard for their own health and safety? Have they stopped taking care of their own bodies and have a mindset of destruction about their person?

A fourth warning sign is discussions about suicide. People get discouraged and sad all the time but it’s one thing to be honest about your sorrow and another thing to be so sad that you start talking about your death. The sword bearer of Saul converses with Saul about his own death. He learns that Saul wants to kill himself. When we are with a loved one or walking with a friend who is starting to talk about their death or start to talk about ending

their life, we are moving into a very risky situation and we need to respond.

Another warning sign is isolation. We see that Saul has cut himself off from any other avenue of help, he is isolated and alone. There is no one who can speak into his life.

We see that in the other victims of suicide in Scripture. Abimelek surrounds himself with only people who will do what they are told to do. He surrounds himself with persons who will follow his orders. Ahithophel gets away from the crowds and goes to his home and sets his affairs in order. Zimri does the same – he moves off and gets away and burns the house down around him. Judas goes out into a field and hangs himself. When we start to notice people isolating themselves and getting away from people who might persuade them to do something different than what that they want to do, we become concerned and need to respond as well.

A sixth warning sign is people who are suicidal in general (and in the biblical account) – they have a plan. It's not just a general desire to want to die but it's a plan. We see Saul's plan here, "I want you to take your sword and run me through with it." He has a plan to use a sword to kill himself. Once people start talking about a plan – a way to do this – we start to be concerned.

Finally, the seventh warning sign and, very closely related to the plan, is the means to carry it out. Saul not only had a plan but wanted to use the sword to die; he had a sword at his disposal to do it. When we start to see people talking about a plan to die and we become aware that they have a means to carry it out, we are in a risky situation and need to be very alert to how we can help.

How To Respond

That leads us to a second reality, how do we respond when we notice specific signs, such as, reasons to die, their reputation is involved and they're self-focused. When we see that people are hopeless and full of despair, when we see patterns of destructive behavior, when we hear them talking about it and getting off alone when we see they have a plan and a means to carry it out, what do we do? We need to do everything we can to remove a suicidal person from danger. When we see people behaving in these ways, we want to make sure they are not alone; we want to do everything we can to be with them or have someone else be with them. We want to get rid of dangerous objects they might use to complete their plan.

There are all sorts of practical things that we can talk about, but I want to mention what is found in Psalm 27. Throughout Saul's life he had seasons of discouragement, but at the end of his life, that discouragement moved to despair and the taking of his own life. The life of David, his successor over the kingdom of Israel, also had times of discouragement in his life but he never moved into a season of utter despair leading to his own death. He is honest from what kept him from doing that in Psalm 27:13, David writes, "I would have despaired unless I had believed that I would see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living."

People become suicidal when they look at the land of the living and they see no goodness of the Lord, but only hopelessness that is tied to their own reason to want to die, their own self-focus. People find a reason to live as David did when they look at the land of the living and they believe there is goodness to be had in it. In particular, not goodness in

general, but seeing the goodness of the Lord.

The lesson for us is when we recognize someone we love might be suicidal; we need to take measures to keep them safe. Be around them, take dangerous things away from them. But as we are with them we don't need to just fill the time talking about just anything, we need to talk about the goodness of the Lord.

We need to turn to text like Psalm 27, which says, "the Lord is my Light and my Salvation whom shall I fear? The Lord is the defense of my life, whom shall I dread?" We can look at Psalm 27:13 and read to people "I would have despaired unless I had believed that I would see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living." The very clear point is that the goodness of God gave David a reason to live and it can give you and your friend a reason to live, too.

This issue of suicide and helping people in the midst of a crisis that could lead to death is one of the most serious things we can engage in our lives. Someone's life is at stake.

If you or someone you love is struggling with the kind of despair that leads you to want to take your life, we want to implore you to get help. Reach out to emergency professionals or call 911 if this is an urgent situation. When it comes time to get counseling care to think through these things, we want to urge you to get someone who will open up the text of Scripture and point you to the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.

FUNNIES

A teacher asked the children in her Sunday School class, "If I sold my house and my car, had a big garage sale and gave all my money to the church, would I get into heaven?"

"NO!" the children all answered.

"If I cleaned the church every day, mowed the yard, and kept everything neat and tidy, would I get into heaven?"

Again, the answer was "NO!"

"Well," she continued, "then how can I get to heaven?"

In the back of the room, a five-year-old boy shouted out, "You gotta be dead!"

One day the zoo-keeper noticed that the monkey was reading two books - the Bible and Darwin's The Origin of Species. In surprise he asked the ape, "Why are you reading both those books"?

"Well," said the monkey, "I just wanted to know if I was my brother's keeper or my keeper's brother."

A husband and first-time father dialed 9-1-1 in a panic. "Help" he cried "My wife is in labor and I don't know what to do."

"Calm down" came the voice on the other end, "is this her first child?"

"No!" The father declared defiantly, "This is her husband!"