

My Friend is Struggling With... - 4 Suicidal Thoughts

Takeaway: God wants a say in how you see yourself; hope is a person named Jesus.

Scripture: Psalm 42:5;7-8, Matthew 26:38, Revelation 12:10, Isaiah 41:10, Psalm 23:4-6, Matthew 11:28

INTRO

Tonight, we are going to talk about strength. Who here thinks they are really strong? If I handed you a heavy weight, would you be able to carry it? (Pick a student to come on stage and hand them a water bottle.).

This bottle has 16oz of water which is roughly 1lb. Use all your strength to lift this bottle and hold it out in front of you. Keep your arm as straight as you can. That's not very heavy, is it? Now, hold that water bottle like you are, for as long as you can. Since it only weighs one pound, that shouldn't be hard.

When we think about strength or how strong someone is, we typically think about how much a person can carry. We quantify strength through how much a person can lift or how well they can deal with stress in a moment. But the strength we are talking about tonight has nothing to do with how much you can carry in a moment but how long you can carry that weight.

Every person in this room carries some type of weight. It could be an issue you are dealing with at home, or a mental illness you have been struggling with your entire life. The heaviness of a burden can't be measured in a moment, but by the length of time you carry it. The longer you carry a weight, the heavier it feels. The longer you deal with something on your own, the more hopeless that weight feels. Is the weight of that bottle increasing? No. But the longer they hold onto it, the heavier it will feel. The same can be said about the feelings we have. When we feel sad, scared, angry, or confused, the weight of those emotions is light enough that they feel manageable to carry, at first. But the longer we ignore those feelings the heavier they become.

SUICIDE

Tonight, we are talking about a very serious topic. What do we do if our friends are struggling with suicidal thoughts? What do we do if we struggle with suicidal thoughts? It's an uncomfortable topic, but it is necessary for us to shine light on a dark topic. When we remain silent, we allow isolation to grow, and our mission is to give hope.

Death by suicide/self-harm is the second leading cause of death among teenagers. It has become a silent epidemic that is often only acknowledged when it is too late. That is why we need to avoid treating it as something taboo or something we can't talk about. The word "suicide" is uncomfortable. It comes with baggage that we don't want to deal with. But we, the church, need to become comfortable talking about it. So, where do we even begin with a topic so serious and dark?

To understand suicide and suicidal thoughts, we need to get the record straight. Suicidal thoughts do not happen because a person has a mental illness. Anxiety and depression do not equal suicidal thoughts. They can become a byproduct of mental health. Mental illness is a diagnosis that you manage; mental health is about the thought-patterns that determine how we see and experience life. People do not kill themselves because they are depressed; they kill themselves, because they feel hopeless.

A person chooses death when they have lost all hope. Imagine this: life hits you hard for a season, but that season never ends. You feel yourself failing over and over. Every day, it feels like you are failing no matter how hard you try. Everyone around you is succeeding, and you keep failing. You become angry with yourself because you can't find a win. Over time, that anger becomes bitterness where you feel like everyone is out to get you. You feel ignored and unseen. Then bitterness may turn to depression. Life becomes numb. The things that once excited you feel like chores. You feel alone and a burden to the people around you. You feel like no one needs you, and if you disappeared, no one would notice. Worse yet, you may feel like if you disappeared, everyone that knows you would be better off.

What was the missing element in this situation? Hope. That circumstance didn't start out heavy, but it became heavier over time. Suicidal thoughts are loudest when we feel hopeless and have carried our burdens too long.

The Psalms are filled with encounters of feeling hopeless. Yes, even those closest to God experience moments of despair and anguish.

Psalm 42:5-10 pg. 268

Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation 6 and my God. My soul is cast down within me; therefore I remember you from the land of Jordan and of Hermon, from Mount Mizar. 7 Deep calls to deep at the roar of your waterfalls; all your breakers and your waves have gone over me. 8 By day the Lord commands his steadfast love, and at night his song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life. 9 I say to God, my rock: "Why have you forgotten me? Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?" 10 As with a deadly wound in my bones, my adversaries taunt me, while they say to me all the day long, "Where is your God?"

The circumstance I described can happen to anyone. This may sound alarming, and if it happens, it should get our attention, but suicidal ideation is more common than we think. Suicidal ideation is an initial thought to a hopeless moment. It could be a moment where you are in mental pain or experiencing the loss of a loved one and your first thought is "I wish I was dead, so I didn't feel this way." This is just a thought, not a plan. It's how you feel in the moment. This type of response is somewhat normal and happens to most people.

What becomes abnormal is when suicidal ideation becomes suicide planning. Suicide planning is the act of finding and planning a way to end your life. Suicide rarely happens in the spur of the moment. Most suicides are planned out, prepared, and mentally rehearsed. So, it's important to understand the difference between suicide ideation and suicide planning. One is a common response to hopelessness, and the other is a misplaced hope in death. So, what does the Bible have to say about suicidal thoughts?

JESUS UNDERSTANDS YOUR PAIN

There are moments throughout the Bible where hopelessness and thoughts of death are addressed. One of the most surprising moments is when the Bible takes us to the most unlikely person: Jesus.

Matthew 26:38

Then he said to them, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with me."

In this moment, Jesus wasn't being figurative. He told His friends that He was so overwhelmed by sorrow that His thoughts turned to death. Jesus is a walking anomaly, because He is fully God (Son of God) and fully human (Son of Man). He is perfection walking this Earth, and yet He was tempted with everything you and I experience: grief, disappointment, sorrow, anxiety, shame, etc. In Isaiah 53:3, He was called a man of sorrows. The agony Jesus faced was so immense He sweated blood; the pain Jesus experienced was so great that He asked God if there might be another way out.

So, why does this matter? Because the people around you may never understand your pain or hopelessness, but Jesus does. Not only did He experience it, but He received a dose of despair that would have destroyed a typical human. The entire kingdom of hell was coming for Him, and the same is sometimes true for you, because mental health is more than just a mental battle. It's also a physical battle, and it is a spiritual battle. Your very identity is often the battlefield.

LIES

The Bible refers to our spiritual enemy as the thief, destroyer, adversary (Satan), and the accuser. His weapon of choice are lies that attack who we are. "You're disgusting, no one wants you, you're a failure, it will never get better, everyone has abandoned you, how could anyone ever love you? You'd be better off dead; everyone you know would be better off if you were dead. They won't even miss you." Have you ever heard those lies in your head? Have you ever felt these thoughts in a moment of despair? This is where suicidal ideation takes root and can push people to begin planning.

The design of these lies is to make you accept them as who you are. That's what shame does. It attacks what makes us beautiful and redefines us as broken. It steals our hope and only offers despair. Shame is a lie living on its last breath. It is desperate to stay alive by leaching off your identity. It needs your attention to give it life, and it will pick apart the best of you to bring out the worst of itself.

Revelation 12:10 pg. 599

And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, "Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God."

However the reality of lies is that they are not true, regardless of how real they may feel. The truth is God loves you and wants what is best for you.

JESUS THOUGHT ABOUT YOU

Hebrews 12:2

looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

The most incredible thing about this verse is that when Jesus was on the cross, there was something on His mind that allowed Him to endure it. There was a joy set before Him. That joy was you. You were on His mind when He was suffering.

How wild is that? In the most painful moment of Jesus' life, He was thinking about you. He saw the chains on your life being broken and the healing that would come to you. He saw the lies of the enemy withering as peace and joy grew. He saw His child turning from suicide and finding hope in the life they were designed for.

GOD WANTS TO FIGHT FOR YOU

If you suffer from suicidal thoughts, you need to know this: You are not a coward for feeling so hopeless that your thoughts went to death. Every day you are alive is a battle you have won; not lost. You are strong; stronger than people know and stronger than even you realize. But this is not a fight that is won by strength or how long you can carry a burden. This is spiritual war that is won by letting go of the weight you've been carrying and reaching out to your loving Father.

Psalm 23:4-6 pg. 261

4 Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. 5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. 6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord

God wants to lead you out of the darkness.

The bottom of the valley is the most vulnerable spot to be in when you are at war. You can be surrounded easily, you are at a height disadvantage, and there is no room for retreat. The psalmist is telling us that even when we are at our weakest moment of life and death surrounds us, God is in the valley with us. He wants to lead us through the darkest thoughts to hope in Him.

He is reaching out to you. He has always been reaching out to you. You were never alone or abandoned in the fight. When shame tries to strip you of your dignity, God wants to give you honor. When you feel alone in your thoughts, His goodness chases after you. Why? Because your life has purpose and meaning.

APPLICATION

This is what the Father's heart looks like to his kids that are suffering. He loves His children and wants them to experience the best of what life has. But getting to a healthier place requires you to take steps. Know this: these are not instant cures but steps to start a journey of healing. The road to finding hope looks like this:

If you struggle with suicidal thoughts

- **Don't Ignore Your Feelings.** Our feelings are like the check engine light in a car. They warn us when something needs to be fixed. When we ignore those feelings and try to carry our hurts, it can lead us to a path of hopelessness. Deal with every feeling and process them. If you don't know how to process those emotions, then open up to a trusted friend or adult.
- **Communicate Your Hurt.** Let them know when you feel hopeless, alone, or abandoned. If people haven't reached out to you, it isn't because they don't care. It's because they are not aware of your pain. When Jesus felt like His soul was being crushed, He turned to His friends to watch over Him.
- **Seek Professional Help.** There are trained counselors that can help you explore the hopelessness you are feeling. If you broke your arm, you wouldn't try to get through the pain alone. You would see a doctor. When your soul feels broken, you shouldn't try to fix yourself either. Everyone should see a mental health specialist once a year to get a mental checkup.
- **Let God Have a Say In How You See.** When hopelessness appears, turn to prayer and the Word of God. You don't have to fight this battle alone. Shame doesn't get the final word about who you are. God does. God isn't waiting on you to reach out. He's already reaching. He doesn't want to meet you halfway. He will meet you where you are.

If you have a friend that is struggling with suicidal thoughts or hopelessness, there are ways you can be a good friend and help.

- **Assess.** Look for signs of suicidal thought patterns such as, eating less, not sleeping well, experience emotional numbness, lack of motivation in things that normally excite them, isolation/avoiding relationships, energy levels going up or down.
- **Always Take Off-hand Comments Seriously.** Examples: "I'm ready to end it all," "I feel like a burden," "the pain I am dealing with is unbearable," "maybe it would be better if I wasn't around anymore."
- **Ask Direct Questions.** "Are you thinking about killing yourself?" Studies show that asking at-risk individuals if they're suicidal doesn't increase suicidal thoughts. It simply assesses the risk. Asking direct questions opens the opportunity for our friends to reach out for help.
- **Connect Them to Hope.** Listen carefully and learn what the individual is thinking and feeling. Findings suggest that acknowledging and talking about suicide may, in fact, reduce suicidal thoughts. Pray with them, pray over them, and affirm them. Don't freak out. Be with them.
- **Connect Them To Help.** The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline's number is 1-800-273-8255 (TALK). Help them expand their support system by connecting them to a trusted family member, pastor, friend, medical doctor, counselor, etc.
- **Stay connected.** Studies show that suicide deaths go down when someone follows up with the at-risk person. Check in with the people you love.

LANDING

The church should be safest place where people can reach out for help. Not only should the church be safe, but it should be a place where people are connected to hope and life. That hope and life can only be found in the presence of Jesus.

Matthew 11:28

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

Let's use this moment to give the kind of rest that Jesus talked about. This is a moment to deal with the burdens that you have been carrying. In a few moments, I am going to ask people to pray with you.

We, the church, want to pray with you. We want to help you carry that weight. We want to prove to you in this moment that you are seen, you are not alone, and you are not abandoned. If you or someone around you is struggling, reach out for help.

How to Talk About Suicidal Ideation with Students:

Be Clear About What Is Shared: Let your students know that if they share something that puts themselves or anyone else in danger, you are obligated to report it to make sure they are safe. A student may try to change their mind or walk a statement back. Let them know that you must take it seriously because you take them seriously.

3 Hurts: There are three different types of hurts that we must report as leaders. 1) A student who is hurting themselves. 2) Someone who is hurting a student. 3) A student who is hurting someone else. If a student shares something that falls into any of those categories, then it must be reported.

Avoid A Narrative That Ends with Death: When we talk about suicide or suicidal ideation, our first instinct is to tell a story of hopelessness that ended in death. Avoid this. This reinforces the idea that struggling with suicidal ideation inevitably ends with suicide. We want to reinforce the idea that there is always hope. We can talk about the struggle of hopelessness, but our main goal in these discussions is to point students away from death and towards hope in Jesus.

Create An Ongoing Strategy: If students share they are struggling with hopelessness or suicidal ideation, have a strategy to stay in contact. Follow up with them. Encourage them. Let them know that they are on your mind.

Small Group Questions:

- How do you define strength?
- What is the difference between suicidal ideation and suicidal planning? (Suicidal ideation is the initial thought of hopelessness. Suicidal planning is misplacing hope in death.)
- Have you ever felt your identity being attacked by thoughts of despair? How did you respond?
- Hebrews 12:2 says *“looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”*
 - What sticks out to you? How did Jesus respond to shame? What was the joy set before Him?
- How can we fight hopelessness?
- How does God respond to our hopelessness?
- Which of the following are easy to do and which are hard?
 - Don't Ignore Your Feelings
 - Communicate Your Hurt to Others
 - Seek Professional Help
 - Let God Have a Say In How You See.
- If you think your friend is struggling with suicidal ideation, what can you do to help?
 - Assess, Take Them Seriously, Ask Direct Questions, Connect Them to Hope, Connect Them to Help, Stay Connected