

*On July 20, 1995, Rev. Tim Brewer, age 36, Senior Pastor of Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, Missouri, committed suicide while recovering from a serious injury. The following is a sermon given by Dr. Wilson Benton at Kirk of the Hills Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, Missouri, the daughter church of Central Presbyterian Church.*

**July 23, 1995**

**"WALKING THROUGH THE VALLEY"**

**PSALM 23**

**W. Wilson Benton, Jr.**

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.  
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.  
He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.  
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.  
Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.  
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever. Amen

I was in Atlanta, leading a Bible Conference. I was alone in the pastor's home sitting on the couch in the den working on the sermon for this morning. The phone call startled me - the phone caller stunned me. "Tim Brewer did what?" I sank back into the couch. Tim Brewer had committed suicide.

This morning I put aside the sermon I planned to deliver to deal with the issue of Tim's death. It seems appropriate that we do so, for we are shocked and saddened; we are concerned and confused; we are bewildered, not knowing what to believe. So many questions are being asked that ought to be addressed and answered.

The first question: **Is suicide a sin?** And the answer is "Yes." The dictionary defines suicide as the taking of one's life voluntarily and intentionally. It's the taking of a life in a manner forbidden by God. It's murder, self-inflicted murder, but murder nonetheless; and God's Word says, "Thou shalt not murder."

God forbids taking another's life and God forbids taking one's own life for the same reason. Human life is made in the image of God. Every human being bears God's image, so the

destruction of a human life is the destruction of God's image bearer, an act which He prohibits. Furthermore, life, all life, belongs to God. "We live and move and have our being in Him" (Acts 17:28). We don't own life; God owns life; and He lends it to us at His pleasure to be lived for our pleasure. Life is not our own to destroy, so the destruction of life by suicide is a sin.

But it's not the unforgivable sin. It has been called that in the past but that is wrong. Homicide is not the unforgivable sin. If that were the case, the apostle Paul would not be forgiven, for by his own testimony he informs us that he was guilty of murder. (Acts 26:11, cf Acts 9:1, Acts 10:21). Homicide is not the unforgivable sin, nor is suicide the unforgivable sin. If a person is not forgiven, then none of his sins are forgiven; but if a person is forgiven then all of his sins, including the sin of suicide, are forgiven. And suicide is forgiven as all other sins are forgiven - for the sake of Jesus Christ. When He died He paid the penalty in full for all of our sins - past, present and future. In Him our sins are removed from us as far as the east is from the west. "There is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1).

The second question: **Can a Christian commit suicide?** And the answer is "Yes." Christians can commit all kinds of sins. Christians are not perfect. We have not been fully sanctified, finally glorified. We still possess our old sinful nature and in that nature resides the potential for every kind of sin. We have the capacity to contemplate crimes that we never commit. But even the contemplation is itself a sin. Do you remember how our Lord Jesus expanded the meaning of the Ten Commandments with His own interpretation? For instance, the seventh commandment: "Thou shalt not commit adultery." Jesus said if you lust after a woman in your heart, if in your own mind you commit adultery, you are guilty of breaking that commandment. (Matthew 5:27-28). The sixth commandment: "Thou shalt not kill." Jesus said if you are so angry you want to kill, if you cry to your brother, "You fool", and you desire to destroy his life, then by that very desire you have broken the commandment. (Matthew 5:21-22). It is wrong for one to take his own life, but it is also wrong for one to contemplate taking his own life. And who of us has not in a moment of despair or frustration or self-pity contemplated at least momentarily the taking of his life.

Sometimes those evil intentions become evil deeds. How does it happen? How does it happen that one takes his own life? I'm not a psychologist but in laymen's language it happens when one focuses on the problems rather than on the solution. The problems loom so large there

seems to be no relief, no escape, no means of bearing the burden.

If you've ever heard Jerram Barrs give his testimony, then you've heard him say that before he became a Christian he seriously contemplated suicide. He said to his mind it was the only logical response to life as he was experiencing it as an unbeliever. But that's not the case for the believer. God's Word says, "No temptation has taken you, (even the temptation to destroy your own life), but such as is common to man, but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that you are able, but will with that temptation always make a way of escape that you may be able to bear it" (I Corinthians 10:13). We are reminded of how crucial it is that we keep our faith focused on Jesus Christ in the midst of all of our problems.

Turn your eyes upon Jesus,  
Look full in His wonderful face;  
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim  
In the light of His glory and grace.

The apostle Peter walked on water; and as long as he kept his eyes focused on the Lord Jesus Christ, he continued to walk on the water. But when he took his eyes from the Lord and began to look at the treacherous waves around him, he began to sink (Matthew 14:29-30).

When through the deep waters I call thee to go,  
The rivers of sorrow will not overflow.  
For I will be with thee, thy troubles to bless  
And sanctify to thee thy deepest distress.

And yet sometime in those deep waters we forget. Our faith, which is real, is nonetheless really weak. And the fogs of despair and discouragement and depression become so thick we cannot see the face of the Lord Jesus. So we need to pray with the man at the foot of the Mount of Transfiguration, "Lord, I believe, help my unbelief" (Mark 9:24).

Actually, it's not so strange that Tim wanted to die. When we remember his situation, when we recall some of the recent struggles in his life, when we remember that he lost a foot just a few months ago, it's not so strange to us that Tim wanted to die and go to heaven because those things don't exist in heaven. And Tim is in good company. The apostle Paul said, "To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord" (II Corinthians 5:8), and Paul not only lays down the principle, he states his preference: "I desire to depart this life and be with the Lord" (Philippians 1:23). Tim's desire for death was not wrong; however, the way in which he fulfilled

that desire was wrong. We are not to take matters into our own hands. We must say with the psalmist, "My times are in thy hands" (Psalm 31:15); "You, O Lord, have numbered the days of my life" (Psalm 90:12).

The third question: **What happens to the person who commits suicide?** Well, that depends. What happens to any person who dies, regardless of how he dies? If that person is an unbeliever, that person goes to hell. If that person is a believer, that person goes to heaven. If the person who commits suicide is not a Christian, that person goes to hell. If the person who commits suicide is a Christian, that person goes to heaven.

Our catechism says, "The souls of believers are at their death," whatever the manner of their death, you see, "the souls of believers are at their death made perfect in holiness and do immediately pass into glory." I hope you have no doubt about the fact this morning that Tim Brewer is in heaven!

The fourth question: **Are others to blame when one commits suicide?** The answer is "No." No doubt many will feel guilty in this situation, as many always do. Why were we not more sensitive? Why were we not more caring? Why did we not encourage? What should I have done? It's all my fault. No, it's not. God makes each of us responsible moral agents, and each of us is accountable to Him for our decisions and the actions that flow from those decisions.

This does not mean, however, that others are without blame and without guilt. Yes, we ought to be more sensitive and more caring and more supportive and certainly more prayerful. There is much blame to bear and we ought to confess our failures before God, but we are not responsible for another's decision. There is a big difference between failing to support one who is suffering and the decision of the sufferer to take his own life; and while we may be guilty of one, we are not guilty of the other.

Just as God in His grace deals with the guilt of the victim, so this morning we should pray that God in His grace will deal with our real guilt. You see, we have enough real guilt to deal with without heaping false guilt on our heads; and besides, if we do, then we can't function as the channels of grace that God would have us be in such situations.

The fifth question: **Is God still in control at the point of suicide?** The answer is "Yes." God is still in control. God is in control of all, or God is not in control at all. If there is one exception, God is not sovereign. God was in control of the tragic event that transpired on

Thursday. We may be tempted to say, "God was loving enough, but God was not powerful enough to stop that tragedy." Or we may be tempted to say, "God was powerful enough but God was not loving enough to stop that tragedy." No, we must affirm both the love and the power of an all wise God. God is loving, He's kind, He's tender, He's merciful, He's compassionate, He's powerful, He's mighty, He's sovereign; and that was an awful, horrible, terrible tragedy. We affirm both the reality of a great God and the reality of a terrible tragedy - but beyond that we affirm that the great God was in control of the terrible tragedy.

Do we have questions? Of course! We want to ask a thousand "why's", don't we? Why did God allow it to happen? Why did He not stop it? We want to know why God allowed sin to come into the world in the first place, don't we. God has a thousand answers for our thousand questions. He may give us the answer, He may not give us the answer, but that does not alter the fact that God knows the answer. God knows what He is doing.

At age 32 William Cowper became so depressed that he determined to take his life. He ordered a horse drawn cab to pick him up at his home and transport him to the London Bridge where he determined to jump to his death. It was a foggy night, the cabbie got lost, William Cowper got frustrated. He told the man to stop, he got out of the cab, he paid his fare and turned around to discover that he was right back at his own doorstep. He went inside, still bent on his evil intention. He drank poison but it made him sick and he threw it up; he fell on a knife and the knife blade broke; he made a crude attempt at hanging himself, but he was discovered, unconscious yet still alive, and he was cut down. In the days that followed as he contemplated these events, he wrote:

God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform;  
He plants His footsteps in the sea, and rides upon the storm.  
You fearful saints, fresh courage take; the clouds you so much dread  
Are big with mercy, and shall break in blessings on your head.  
Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, but trust Him for His grace;  
Behind a frowning providence He hides a smiling face.  
Blind unbelief is sure to err, and scan His work in vain:  
God is His own interpreter, and He will make it plain.

In His own time, whether in this life or in the life to come, God will make His own plan plain. Till then we must say with Habakkuk, "The just shall live by faith ... The Lord is in His

Holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him" (Habakkuk 2:4,20).

The sixth question: **Do God's promises still apply to the person who commits suicide?** And the answer is "Yes." All of God's promises still apply to the person who commits suicide, for don't you see all of God's promises in Christ are "yes" and in Him "Amen." (II Corinthians 1:20). Suicide does not contravene the promises of God. Suicide does not place one outside the parameters of the promises of God. Suicide does not make null and void the promises of God.

Can the Twenty Third Psalm, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want, .... yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil," - can the Twenty Third Psalm honestly with integrity be read at Tim Brewer's funeral service? Yes, I hope it will be. Can John 14 with all of its promises, the promises of peace, the great legacy of Jesus Christ, "Peace I leave with you," peace for these people so distraught - can this passage that describes in detail the home in glory that Jesus prepares for those that are His, can these passages be read? Yes. What about the promise of Romans 8:28? "God causes all things, even suicide, to work together for good for those who love Him." Yes, even that promise applies!

Robert Haldane, one of the great Puritan ministers, wrote:

If all things work together for good, there is nothing within the compass of being that is not in one way or the other advantageous to the children of God. The creation of the world, the fall, the redemption of man, all the dispensations of providence whether prosperous or adverse, all occurrences and all events, all things whatsoever they be work for their good. They do not work thus of themselves. It is God that turns all things to the good of His children. The afflictions of believers in a peculiar manner contribute to this end. (Listen carefully.) Even the sins of believers work for their good. Not from the nature of sin but by the goodness and power of Him who brings light out of darkness. Everywhere in Scripture we read of the great evil of sin, everywhere we receive the most solemn warnings against its commission, and everywhere we hear also the chastisement it brings even upon those who are rescued from its final condemning power. It is not sin then in itself that works the good, but God who over rules its effect to His children's good.

Good even for Tim's family? Yes. Good for Tim's church? Yes. Good for the kingdom of God at large? Yes. Remember the cross. Remember the cross. Out of the greatest evil this world has ever known came forth the greatest good this world will ever know.

The seventh question: **And what should we do?** How should we respond in the face of this teaching from God's Word? We should cry. We should cry out in *pain*. The Bible says

weep with those who weep. (Romans 12:15). This is a tragedy that calls for tears. We ought to hurt with those who are hurting - Tim's family and Tim's congregation - as if that hurt were our very own.

We should cry out in pain but we should also cry out in *prayer*. We do not pray for Tim. Tim is beyond the reach of our prayers. He is beyond the need of our prayers. But we should pray for Tim's family and we should pray for his congregation, and we should pray for those who are bewildered and confused by his actions, and we should pray that God will somehow use all of this for His own honor and glory, and we should pray that He would even use this to bring people to faith in Jesus Christ, and we should pray for ourselves that we may be more sensitive to the pain born by those around us, more supportive, more encouraging, more prayerful.

We should cry out in pain and we should cry out in prayer and we should cry out in *praise*. While we do not pray to God for Tim we can praise God for Tim. We can praise God for his life and for his ministry and all of the wonderful ways in which God has used him. We can praise Him for the evidence of His own divine love and mercy and grace we saw in Tim's life. But most of all we can praise God for being God, for being the God He really is, the God whom we can trust even in the face of such tragedies, the God to whom we can turn with all of our questions and heartache and pain, the God who has already triumphed for us in Jesus Christ.

A letter has been prepared by the pastoral staff at Central Presbyterian Church and it's being read to congregation in the services there this morning. Listen to what that letter says in part:

"We do not know the reason our pastor and friend, Dr. Timothy Brewer, took his own life. It brings us confusion, grief, and even anger. The one we looked up to so highly has fallen, and it shakes us and distresses us to the core. What Tim did was not right. It causes and will cause intense pain in his family, his friends, and his church. The Bible says, "You shall not kill." Tim killed himself. The good news is that when Jesus Christ died for our sins, He died for all of them, past, present and future. During times of distress even strong believers can become weak in faith and love and fall into the greatest of sins. But when we do, we sin as a child of God, not as an enemy of God. Because believers are chosen by God and God is eternally our Father in Christ, we cannot fall completely away from God. Dr. Brewer repeatedly declared his faith in Jesus Christ, and his belief that only through Jesus could he be made right with God. We believe that is not in his right living, nor in his right dying, but the righteousness of Jesus Christ that enables any man to enjoy the presence of God forever."

And so the last question; it's the most important question of all, far more important than

any question we have already considered; it's just this: **Are you right with God, through faith in Jesus Christ?**

Come, ye disconsolate, where'er ye languish;  
Come to the mercy seat, fervently kneel;  
Here bring your wounded hearts, here tell your anguish;  
Earth has no sorrow that heaven cannot heal.

Joy of the desolate, Light of the straying,  
Hope of the penitent, fadeless and pure,  
Here speaks the Comforter, tenderly saying,  
"Earth has no sorrow that heaven cannot cure."

Here see the Bread of Life; see waters flowing  
Forth from the throne of God, pure from above;  
Come to the feast of love; come, ever knowing  
Earth has no sorrow but heaven can remove.

Amen.