

## IS LIFE WORTH LIVING ?

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on December 5, 1965 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

Over twenty thousand Americans take their own lives every year. Every day fifty-five men and women die by their own hand. Two die every hour. One dies every thirty minutes. Why? The answer is at once simple and complex. Reduced to its simplest form, the answer to this wide-spread, self-inflicted carnage lies in the belief that life is not worth living. Suicide is now the nation's tenth ranking cause of death.

Some time ago we read of a young girl in England who leaped to her death from a high window of a famous cathedral. Although I fully realize that the church is not a building, it seems to me that there may have been something symbolic in the fact that she turned her back upon religion and was dashed to pieces in the streets below. Another account told of a young man in New York who climbed out onto a promontory of a building and was about to jump. A crowd gathered. Police plead with him not to jump, yet all was in vain. Among his last words were these, "I wish someone could convince me that life is worth living."

The rising rate of suicides seems especially strange at a time when our living standard is higher than ever before. Never have people been so well fed, so well clothed, and so well housed. Never have there been so many luxuries of life. Never has there been so much entertainment available. It seems especially strange that this gruesome set of statistics should come at a time when the combined resources of the world's top-flight medical scientists are being utilized for the preservation of life. Never has so much been done to protect life and to extend the life span as now. Those who destroy themselves come from all levels of life--the rich and the poor, the young and the old, the educated and the uneducated. Strangely, surprisingly, a number of people are questioning whether or not life is worth living.

### What Are The Causes?

The sociologists and psychologists of our day mention a number of factors as causes for suicides. In their lists are such things as illness, distress, financial reverses, frustration, loneliness, aimlessness, and a failure to love and be loved. In some instances suicide appears to occur in lives that have been fraught with difficulties and sufferings. A person finds his circumstances so severe that he simply does not have the strength to go on. This type of person might well listen to Immanuel Kant, the noted philosopher, who pictured man's struggle to live in terms of a dove's struggle to fly. With remarkable insight, he imagined that the dove might regard the resistance of air as something to be overcome. The resistance of the air might well be conceived as a hindrance to easy, free flight. However, it is this resistance of the air that makes possible the dove's flight. No bird could fly in a vacuum. We see a confirmation of this in the fact that our great planes take off into the wind and land into the wind. Were it not for the resistance of the air pushing upward on the lower side of the wings, there could be no air travel. Actually, many of the difficulties and sufferings of life add challenge and zest to living.

It is this line of thought that takes us back to the apostle Paul and to his listing of the difficulties which he had met: "Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day have I been in the deep; in journeyings often, in perils of rivers, in perils of robbers, in perils from my countrymen, in perils from the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in labor and travail, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness." (II Cor. 11:24-27). It would seem that these were enough difficulties to overcome any man, but across the page in my Bible is the apostle's reaction, "Wherefore I take pleasure in weaknesses, in injuries, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong ... I will most gladly spend and he spent for your souls." (II Cor. 12:10, 15).

There are others who come to suicide out of a background of luxury and affluence. Some years ago we learned of the voluntary death of a young man who was heir to a large fortune. Prominent as a socialite, rich beyond description, and indulged to the limit, he found life a bore. As someone said, "He had everything to live with, but nothing to live for." This is the story of an occasional suicide among the top movie stars of the day. Just here we need to remember our Lord's statement, "A man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth." (Luke 12:15). We can also recognize the wisdom which we find stated in Proverbs 30:8-9, "Give me neither poverty nor riches. Feed me with the food that is needful for me: lest I be full, and deny thee, and say, Who is Jehovah? Or lest I be poor, and steal, and use profanely the name of my God." Paul's admonitions to Timothy are also appropriate here, "But godliness with contentment is great gain: for we brought nothing into the world, and neither can we carry anything out; but having food and covering we shall be therewith content." (I Tim. 6:6).

The despondent, negative attitude toward life results not so much from the circumstances which surround a person, as from the inner reaction to those circumstances. Some who appear to possess very little of the world's goods are nevertheless genuinely grateful and pray prayers of deep gratitude to God for his blessings to them. Others who have everything find that life has lost its taste and that their luxury brings them no happiness. One mother has a radiance upon her face and a glow in her eyes as she looks upon her new

born child, while another mother looks upon an unwanted new born child with resentment and hatred in her eyes. The babies are not different; only the attitudes of the mothers. Some are crushed by life, while others are challenged by it.

In view of the disturbing statistics which we have noticed and in view of the factors that lead people to commit suicide, I would like now to suggest four simple but profound rules for living. These are attitudes which will make impossible the despondent negative attitudes that lead to suicide.

### I. Dependence Upon God

In the Old Testament book of Jeremiah are the words, "O Jehovah, I know that the way of man is not in himself: it is not in man that walketh to direct his steps." (Jeremiah 10:23). No matter how well educated, or how mature, man still finds himself unable to cope with all of the exigencies of life. Man still in this modern twentieth century needs God to guide him. In David's great twenty-third Psalm are the words, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me." (Ps. 23:4). In Matt. 28-20 we read the last words that our Lord spoke on earth before his ascension and they also emphasize this eternal presence. "And lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world."

The apostle added, "In nothing be anxious, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall guard your hearts and your thoughts in Christ Jesus." A few moments later he added, "I can do all things through Christ that strengtheneth me." (Phil. 4:6-7, 13).

The greatest deterrent to suicide is a strong religious faith. Notice the way the apostle Paul faced his difficulties. "We are pressed on every side, yet not straightened; perplexed, yet not unto despair; pursued, yet not forsaken; smitten down, yet not destroyed ... Wherefore we faint not; but though our outward man is decaying, yet our inward man is renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is for the moment, worketh for us more and more exceedingly an eternal weight of glory." (II Cor. 4:8-9, 16-17). At another time Paul wrote, "What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? ... Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or anguish, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ... Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us." (Rom. 8:31, 35, 37).

### II. Willingness To Accept Our Lot

It is often difficult to accept poverty in the face of the affluence and luxury of others. It is difficult to accept serious illness in the face of the radiant health of others about us. In many circumstances it is not easy to accept our lot. However, the reading of the New Testament, which presents so appealingly God's true set of values is a great help. We learn that there are many things more important and more permanent than health, and an abundance of this world's goods. As we drink in the deep reassurance and encouragement that comes from reading God's promises, we find the strength to endure whatever this life may bring. Returning to Paul's great fourth chapter of Philippians we find him saying, "I have learned in whatsoever state I am, therein to be content. I know how to be abased, and I know also how to abound; in everything and in all things have I learned the secret both to be filled and to be hungry, both to abound and to be in want. I can do all things through Christ that strengtheneth me." (Phil. 4:11-13).

### III. Live In The Present

I was impressed recently with the words of William Osler, "If the load of tomorrow be added to that of yesterday and carried today, it will make the strongest falter. Live in day-tight compartments. Don't let yesterday and tomorrow intrude on your life. Live one day at a time. You will avoid the waste of energy, the mental distress, the nervous worries that dog the steps of the man who is anxious about the future." It is impressive to remember that this is exactly what Jesus said in the long ago: "Be not therefore anxious for the morrow; for the morrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof." (Matt. 6: 34).

Recently I talked with a newspaper editor, and he told me of the dread that he sometimes feels as he enters a new year, realizing his responsibility of producing approximately one thousand editorials during the year. Yet, if he simply thinks of writing two or three each day, the task is not beyond him. Imagine the housewife's dread if she could suddenly see the miles and miles of floors that she must sweep in the remaining years of her life. Imagine her shock and discouragement if she could see in one mountainous stack all of the dishes that she must wash in the remainder of her life. Living one day at a time, she can sweep the floor and wash the dishes without being overcome, but to see all of it at one time would be overwhelming.

In many respects it is good for us to encourage young people to look toward the future and to make plans for the future. However, there is one aspect that I believe hurtful. We talk to our pre-school children about the day when they will begin to go to school, in such a manner as to leave them dissatisfied until they can be big enough to go to school. Immediately, when the child is in grade school, we cause him to be dissatisfied until he is in junior high school.

Being in the fourth grade is no good, because one is not big enough to be in junior high school. Similarly, junior high school is no good because one wants to be in high school. High school is no good, because one wants to be in college. Being in college leaves much to be desired, and the average student thinks longingly of receiving his diploma. Even that, however, does not bring the

satisfaction expected, because there is then the urgent desire to get a job, to have a home, to rear a family, and all the rest. Retirement is eagerly anticipated through the years, until it comes. Eventually each of us wakes up to the fact that he should have been enjoying each day as it came. While it is wise to have goals and aims for the future, it is not wise to live in the future. So doing robs the present of its great joy. We like the words of the prayer, "Lord, for tomorrow and its deeds I do not pray; keep me, my God, from stain of sin just for today."

#### IV. Accept A Worthwhile Challenge For Life

Again, we are reminded of the apostle Paul when he said, "Brethren, I count not myself yet to have laid hold: but one thing I do, forgetting the things which are behind, and stretching forward to the things which are before, I press on toward the goal unto the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus." (Phil. 3:13-14). Paul was able to undergo tremendous persecutions without flinching, largely because he had a tremendous dedication to Christ and his Cause.

Victor Frankel, in his book *Man's Search For Meaning*, tells about his unfortunate existence in a concentration camp during World War II. He was herded together with hundreds of other men, fed and treated generally like an animal. Life became unbearable, in the filth and deprivation of the concentration camp. Men came to lose all of their previous civilized sensitivities and behaved almost like ferocious animals. Frankel makes the comment that many died and many others lost touch with reality. Those who survived, he observes, were those who continued to have purpose in life. Then, he suggests quite penetratingly, that in our modern highly-complicated, sometimes ruthless twentieth century civilization, the ones who will survive are the ones who have worthwhile purpose in life. This is that Christ provides for our lives.

#### Conclusion

We remember with appreciation the words of Longfellow, in his *A Psalm of Life*:

"Life is real; Life is earnest  
And the grave is not its goal;  
Dust thou art,  
To dust returnest,  
Was not spoken of the soul.

To those who have found life burdensome and overwhelming, we would say in the words of the familiar hymn,

Bring Christ your broken life, So marred by sin,  
He will create anew, Make whole again;  
Your empty, wasted years He will restore  
And your iniquities remember no more.

Christ provides the foundation for our lives, the purpose for our existence, and gives life meaning.