

## Reflections On Rick Warren's Tragedy

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*"For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance" (Ecclesiastes 3:1-4)*

*"Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep." (Romans 12:15)*

### The Brokenness of Life

I was deeply saddened by two disturbing pieces of news this weekend. The first was a news report early Saturday that Matthew Warren, the 27 year old son of Pastor Rick Warren, had committed suicide after a life of battling mental illness and depression. Later that day I received an e-mail from a house church friend that an individual who had been part of their house church also committed suicide following a very difficult year of battling personal trauma and an episode of being prescribed wrong medications. These two pieces of news came as "double blows" and sent me into a time of reflection. The result is this newsletter.

Let me begin by making two confessions. First, I am no expert on depression, or what Winston Churchill referred to as that time in someone's life *"when the black dog howls"*. I am a theologian by training, not a counselor. And at moments like this, theology can only carry you so far. My theology reminds me that we live in a broken, fallen world. The catastrophe of man's fall into sin in the Garden of Eden has corrupted God's perfect creation, leaving it profoundly broken and tattered. We are what Calvin described as "a glorious ruin". Things and people do not work as God originally intended. And while the redemption which we experience in Christ through faith begins the process of God's redemption of our personal brokenness, it will never be complete in our earthly lifetime. Such a truth is sometimes hard to embrace, but it is truth nonetheless.

Yes, He is the God Who *"heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds."* (Psalms 147:3) But not every heart gets healed and not every wound gets bound on this side of eternity, not even among professing Christians. It doesn't mean that God doesn't love us, or that we aren't faithful. It simply means that not everything gets "fixed" in this "present evil age" (Galatians 1:4). It's why we eagerly look forward with hope and faith to "the age to come" when there will be no more tears.

My second confession is closely related. I am no expert on suicide, as either a theologian or as a counselor. My position as a theologian is that Scripture has very little to say about the issue. The question everyone wants to ask is, *"Does the person who commits suicide go to heaven?"* Scripture never addresses that question. The examples of suicide in Scripture (King Saul, Judas Iscariot) are always people who would not have gone to heaven if they had stepped in front of a bus, so taking their own life was not the definitive issue. I don't think it ever is. If their faith was genuine and they would have gone to heaven in a bus accident, then I don't see why their suicide would change that. From my limited perspective, all other theological arguments are unconvincing deductive arguments about the "implications" of this verse or that doctrine. Theological types and bible teachers want "certainty," often because hurting people ask for it. But there are times in life when the only certainties are God's immense love and the need to weep and mourn in the midst of our brokenness. I appreciate the words of Natalie Grant's song, "Held," when she sings, *"This is what it means to be held, when the sacred is torn from life and we survive."* Yep, what she said.

### A Time To Mourn

There is a truth which the writer of Ecclesiastes understood and which we need to embrace. There is a time when it is not only appropriate to mourn. It is absolutely necessary. Job's friends understood this reality. For all their many faults, including giving "cheap answers" to "expensive questions" they really didn't understand, Job's three friends understood the need to simply sit with their friend on the ash-heap of his life and mourn.

*"And when they saw him from a distance, they did not recognize him. And they raised their voices and wept, and they tore their robes and sprinkled dust on their heads toward heaven. And they sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great." (Job 2:12-13)*

While I believe the Apostle Paul understood this truth, my own experience is that Christians don't mourn well. Perhaps it is because we think weeping and mourning reveals some hidden weakness on our part. Perhaps we think mourning demonstrates a lack of faith. None of these "Christian myths" (and others I could list) are true. I believe mourning represents a biblical expression of the heart of God toward His broken world.

The shortest verse in the Bible is found in John 11:35, "*Jesus wept.*" It happened as Jesus stood outside the tomb of Lazarus. "*Now when Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet, saying to him, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.' When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled. And he said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said to him, 'Lord, come and see.'*" (John 11:32-34)

Over the years theologians and Bible scholars have wondered why Jesus wept. I believe Jesus wept at the tomb of Lazarus because His heart was broken and grieved over the profound brokenness of His creation, epitomized in the death of a close friend. Jesus knew that a day would soon come when His Church would be able to declare, "*When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: 'Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?'"* (1 Corinthians 15:54-55) But today was not that day. Jesus knew that a new age was coming when the brokenness of His creation would be healed, and God Himself would "*wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.*" (Revelation 21:4) But today was not that day. Today, Jesus wept, and mourned the brokenness of His creation and the death of a friend.

### **If I Could Spend Time With Rick Warren**

I do not know Rick and Kay Warren. But if I were a friend with access to their lives, here is what I would want to do. I would want to visit them in their home. I would want take a towel with me. Maybe two. With one, I would ask to wash their feet and to tell them how much God loves them, how much their heart-ache is His heart-ache. What about the second towel? I would offer to sit with them on the ash-heap of their pain - without saying a word if necessary - and weep and lament and mourn. There are seasons in our lives when it's the only truly biblical and spiritual thing to do. It is also the most human. That's what the second towel would be for. We would need it.

If God-incarnate could stand at the grave-side of a friend and weep without shame at the brokenness of His creation, so can we. We not only can, we must.