

*how to be a
force for
life in a
culture
of suicide*

*Includes
a Practical
Tool Kit*

Hope Always

Matthew Sleeth, MD

Advance Praise for *Hope Always*

Everything Matthew Sleeth writes is a combination of gentle realism, biblical insight, and compassion. Given the pain and complexity swirling around suicide, a book on the topic needs all these in spades. Once again, Sleeth has delivered. This is a must-read book for those who need wisdom and hope in the face of grief or despair.

MARK GALLI

FORMER EDITOR IN CHIEF OF *CHRISTIANITY TODAY*

Hope Always sounds an appropriate, biblical warning and yet provides ultimate hope to anyone considering harming themselves. Dr. Matthew Sleeth's insightful, easy-to-read book is also a much-needed manual for all who attempt to counsel troubled souls battling despair. Those of us who are in Christian ministry would do well to have a dozen copies of this timely book on hand, ready to share with any who are even remotely contemplating suicide or with family members devastated by it.

BOB RUSSELL

RETIRED SENIOR PASTOR, SOUTHEAST CHRISTIAN CHURCH,
LOUISVILLE, KENTUCKY

Matthew Sleeth's mission for *Hope Always* is to save lives. He helps us understand what we can really do in our personal lives and faith communities to help people avoid "the voice of demons beckoning." These are certainly stressful times, and many are questioning themselves and the world around them. I wish I'd had this book a few years ago. It might have made the ultimate difference in helping me help someone persevere. It certainly will in the future.

BOB PERKOWITZ

PRESIDENT AND FOUNDER OF ECOAMERICA



*Hope is the thing with feathers that
perches in the soul and sings the tune without
the words—And never stops at all.*

EMILY DICKINSON





Hope Always

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Matthew Sleeth, MD



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Introduction

Everything that is done in the world is done by hope.

MARTIN LUTHER

CERTAIN OBJECTS around my house are haunted. The brass pen from my sister Naomi. The ceramic vase made by Carol that sits on my desk. The beautiful quarter-sawn oak kitchen that our cabinetmaker Josh struggled to get just right. Even the wedding portrait of Nancy and me taken forty years ago, with Mark standing by my side.

These objects have a sadness about them, but not just because the people who gave or made them are gone. At my age I've lost many friends. No, some deaths are tougher to get beyond than others. Some haunt you. It's the manner in which the people died that makes moving on so hard.

Two years ago, my sister said she was going to kill herself. She disappeared in Eastern Europe, and emails asking if she is alive go unanswered and unanswered. Last spring, shortly after installing our kitchen, Josh hanged himself. Mark, the best man in my wedding, and Carol, my childhood friend, both shot themselves.

Sad and painful stories like these are familiar to almost everyone. This

coming year, over a hundred thousand Americans will die by their own hand. Some will be classified as accidental overdoses, others as intentional suicides. Whether by intention or accident, for these people America was

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*Suicide is a disease
for which prevention
is the only acceptable
treatment.*

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not a place of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Instead, it was a landscape of depression, addiction, loneliness, pain, frustration, and—in the end—premature death.

What should we do? Mental health experts say we need more counselors. Doctors say we need more medicines. Teachers say we need more education. There is something to be said for each of these recommendations, but what if the men and women suffering from depression

are really just the sensitive ones among us? What if they are our “canary in the coal mine”? What if we’ve built a world that is unlivable?

Hope Always is a guide for people who currently deal with, have dealt with, or will deal with suicide. It is for people who are struggling with suicidal ideation and the friends, family, colleagues, and church leaders who love them.

At its core, this book is both an argument for life and a plan for preventing suicide. Throughout these pages, I will offer you a perspective not typically found in books about suicide. Here we will focus on why people *did not* commit suicide rather than on why they *did*. We will also examine the limitations of statistics and dig deeply into the role of faith in preventing suicide.

If you have lost someone to suicide, my heart aches for you. And while I hope you will find comfort and answers here, this book is not primarily about easing your pain. Rather, this book is written in an attempt to keep others from hurting in the way you do now. It is about preventing suicide. Suicide is a disease for which prevention is the only acceptable treatment.

I am intensely interested in what keeps people alive. Too often, however, when looking for solutions we turn to those who have failed. When

I wrote my first book years ago, I cited the case of the two most popular books on marriage at the time. The author of the most popular book had been married five times and was the third spouse of the author of the second most popular marriage book. Although it is possible to learn from others' mistakes, we should also heed Jesus' warning about the dangers of the blind leading the blind.¹

The beliefs and thoughts expressed in this book flow from two ancient historic streams. First, I write as a Western, scientifically trained physician in the tradition of those who have been taking an oath since the fifth century BC to "first, do no harm." Throughout my career as an ER doctor and chief of the hospital medical staff, I asked hundreds of people, "Are you thinking about harming yourself?" I committed scores of patients against their will. I pumped stomachs, intubated, and dialyzed, trying to give my patients another shot at life.

Second, my writing rests on an ardent belief in and personal relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. Throughout the majority of my medical career as I fought to prevent suicide, I was an atheist. At age 47, I met the Lord. Fortunately, the ethics about suicide contained in the Hippocratic oath are in complete agreement with the theologies of both Judaism and Christianity. When I became a Christian, my beliefs about many things changed. However, instead of abandoning my medical beliefs about preventing suicide, I found them firmly undergirded by my new faith. They now rest on a thousands-year-old theological foundation of bedrock.

Since becoming a Christian, I have focused on a different kind of healing than I practiced as a doctor. In chapels, churches, universities, and homes across the country, I've been friend and minister to those who have heard the voice of demons beckoning them into eternal night. Homer once described their haunting song as one sung by Sirens. Have you heard it? Do you know someone who has? Although suicide is rarely addressed from the pulpit, you are far from alone. Youth leaders and elders, pastors and priests, seminary presidents and Sunday school teachers—no one is left untouched by our suicide crisis.

My faith in God is based upon firsthand experience. I am not a theologian telling you what he has read; I am a follower telling you what he has seen. I have seen at close hand what faith in the Lord can and cannot do for those struggling with suicide, addiction, and mental illness.

I am grateful beyond words to those who helped with this book. In order to write it, I met with hundreds of men, women, and youth who shared their experiences with depression and suicide. To those who communicated their stories in school classrooms, maximum security prisons, nursing homes, and churches, I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

I am especially indebted to the people who shared what got them through their dark nights and allowed them to come out on the other side, stronger in their faith and pursuit of life. Your courage and candor inspired me. Your example will save others.

This book is written in three parts. The first deals with the extent of the suicide problem we face. You can't tackle a

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*We who live in the
age of suicide are indeed
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sister's keepers.*

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problem until you know it exists and how bad it is. The second part examines what the Bible has to say about suicide. For the vast majority of Western history, the church and the theology of the Bible were the primary sources of wisdom on dealing with suicide. Although denigrated by many today, the church's ability to prevent suicide in the past may have actually been better than what modern medicine

is capable of today. When it comes to suicide, the bottom line is the bottom line.

The third portion of the book provides strategies for applying the best of both secular and sacred paradigms to prevent suicide. I'll offer guidance primarily for two audiences: people who have a friend or family member struggling with suicidal ideation and churches that want to help. I've also included resources in the appendix that many will find helpful.

To keep this book focused and effective, we will not discuss the issue

of suicide at the end of life. Although I believe the Bible does contain an ethic on this subject, the topic of euthanasia deserves its own book.

Not everything in this book will be easy to hear. Some readers will get upset with what I say and how I say it, but I believe the seriousness of this subject demands that we speak unvarnished truth. At the end of this book, just as at the end of the day, what matters is life. I'd rather somebody be mad at me and be alive.

Everything written here is designed to help you become part of the solution to our current suicide epidemic. *Hope Always* is a journey toward understanding why God sent his only Son so that we might have *life*—and have it more abundantly. I want those who are depressed among us to live. I want you to be able to help others to live. We who live in the age of suicide are indeed our brother's and our sister's keepers.

And I want the next generation to grow up in a world where pens, vases, and photographs no longer haunt anyone.

Matthew Sleeth, MD

PART 1

The Problem of Suicide

*The anguish completely paralyzed me. I could no longer sleep.
I cried uncontrollably for hours. I could not be reached by consoling words
or arguments. I no longer had any interest in other people's problems.
I lost all appetite for food and could not appreciate the beauty of
music, art, or even nature. All had become darkness.*

**HENRI NOUWEN,
THE INNER VOICE OF LOVE**



A Tale of Two Patients

THE KEY ROLE OF FAITH IN
SUICIDE PREVENTION



*In my deepest wound I saw your glory,
and it astounded me.*

AUGUSTINE

LET ME TELL YOU about two people I met at work. One wanted to die. The other wanted to live. They've stuck with me because of what they had in common and the ways they were completely different. I met the first on a Saturday, just before midnight. He came in by ambulance.

The patient was a man in his late twenties. He worked at the nearby naval base as a civilian. He took no medicines, had no known allergies, and had never been hospitalized. In short, he was in excellent health. He wasn't married, but a serious relationship with his girlfriend had ended three weeks before. He'd grown up locally. He had parents and an older sister living in the same town.

Thirty minutes prior to arriving at the emergency department, he made the biggest decision of his life. He did this without consulting any of the people who loved him. He placed a loaded .22-caliber pistol to his temple and pulled the trigger. A neighbor heard the shot and came running. The rescue squad brought him to my hospital.

I first met the patient when the EMTs transferred him from the ambulance gurney onto the bed at the center of our trauma room. Other than a raised area and a small entrance wound over his right temple that was covered by blood-matted hair, he almost appeared to be resting with his eyes shut. He was breathing on his own and his vital signs were nearly normal. His shirt was brown plaid, splattered with blood, and he wore jeans.

As I stood beside his bed, ordering labs and X-rays, his vital signs became less vital. I intubated him. I don't recall all the details of what happened over the next hour. There came a time, however, when if I'd been playing pinball and bumped the machine a little to the left, we would have called it a day and notified the transplant team. I pushed toward resuscitation, not for any religious reasons—I had no faith at that time—but because I subscribed to the ethic of life found in the Hippocratic oath. And so the patient was transferred, and I heard no more about him.

The next man in my tale of two patients came to the emergency department in a less dramatic fashion. The patient arrived Friday at midmorning. An ambulance brought him, but that was because he was quadriplegic and couldn't get into a car on his own. The ambulance transported him without lights or sirens. He, too, was in his late twenties. He had a fever of 102 degrees Fahrenheit. I introduced myself. He told me his name—"Hi, I'm Lee Barrett." I had to bend down right next to him to make out what he was saying. I asked him about his cough, history of urinary tract infections, and a number of other routine questions. He had difficulty forming his words. He seemed to apologize for taking my time, frequently giving me an easy and beguiling smile. He had some use of his left (nondominant) hand, none of his right hand, and none of his legs. He was unemployed.

Mr. Barrett very much wanted me to find out what was wrong and fix it. He was scheduled to spend the weekend with his parents away from the nursing home. He really didn't want to miss the time with them.

I ordered labs, a urinary analysis, and a chest X-ray and was looking at another chart when his nurse came over and spoke to me. "Matthew, do you know who the patient is in room 5?"

“Mr. Barrett?” I answered. But that was not what she was driving at. “It’s the man you saw last spring who shot himself.” I looked up. She nodded. “His parents are on the way. They specifically asked if you would be here when they arrive in an hour. They really want to talk with you.”

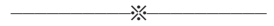
Why did they want to talk with me? Were they angry? Disappointed? I wasn’t sure they’d see what I had done for their son as a great favor—he would spend the rest of his life as a quadriplegic, unable to speak clearly. Although Lee Barrett had not seemed angry with me, I steeled myself for the worst.

My anxieties were soon allayed. The parents literally fell on my neck in thanks. The mother kissed me. The father kissed me. They kept repeating, “You gave us our son back!” Lee had found a reason for living, they told me. “He got his faith back!”

Got his faith back. I had heard this phrase before, but at that point in my life I don’t think I’d ever personally met someone who had made this claim. With the exception of one person from medical school, I didn’t have a close friend who had faith in the first place. If pressed, I think some of my friends might have acknowledged belief in an abstract creator who started up the world and was off doing whatever one does for an encore after creating a universe. But a God who could change lives? Answer prayers? Offer hope?

Yet here before me was someone who had actually made the choice to die and come as close to it as one can possibly get, and though he would never walk and might never get a job, marry, or have children, he was now glad to be alive. According to Lee Barrett and his family, his faith was what made him want to live.

Hearing about the power of faith is one thing. Seeing it firsthand is



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another. An emergency department is a front-row seat to the reality show of life. We get to see people from the entire spectrum: sinners and saints, commoners and kings, patients from five days to a hundred and five years old. Often we meet people at their worst. And occasionally we get to see humanity at its very best, caught in one of its shining moments.

Embodied within this family of father, mother, and quadriplegic son, I was looking directly at the remarkable power of faith: faith that gives meaning where no meaning had existed before; faith that pulls the bunny of life out of the hat of death; faith that heals the unhealable scars of life.

As an atheist, I did not understand everything that was taking place that day, but I knew as well as anyone just how much Lee Barrett had once wanted to die. Now I got to see the same man, physically diminished but spiritually healthier. I'd been concerned that the parents would be angry with me for burdening them and their son with a less-than-bright future. But that was not the case. To them, the future was ablaze with light, life, and possibilities in a way my atheism could not explain.

ATHEISM AND HOPE

What is it about faith that changes the calculus of suicide? And what is it about faith—and particularly the Christian faith—that leads to fewer suicides? We'll explore this question throughout the book. But right now, I want us to consider the reverse: How does a lack of faith influence suicidal ideation? In what ways does a lack of faith create a world that, as I suggested in the introduction, has become unlivable?

Having lived a majority of my life as an atheist, I'm well versed in what people without faith do and don't believe. For instance, a core belief of atheism is the acceptance that the universe, our planet, and all the life on it came into being by accident. If there is no God, then no God and no plan was ever involved in the creation of anything. The end point of this philosophy is that you and I are the result of a fantastic series of accidents. In short, we are all a cosmic mistake.

This dictum is at the very core of what is taught in modern secular

public education. Thus, even without realizing it, the philosophy of atheism and its underlying tenets make their way into most people's thoughts. From kindergarten through medical school, my secular education taught me that life is common and inevitable. Leave the raw ingredients of the universe lying around long enough and a Shakespeare, Bach, or Newton will inevitably pop out of the primordial ooze.

Add to "you are an accident" the belief that nothing exists after death, and it becomes difficult to make a rational argument to keep going when facing a hard time. "Why am I here?" doesn't have a compelling answer without God.

It is not just individuals who come up short when they ask what the meaning of life is; society does too. If everything that exists is just the result of a series of random events, then what is the significance of humanity? For that matter, what is the significance of anything? It doesn't take an advanced degree in psychiatry to understand how "we have no ultimate reason for being" fails to bolster the human spirit.

When I subscribed to the "you are an accident" philosophy, I tended to look for meaning outside the scale of human existence. I was not alone. I read books and listened to people who spoke of both inestimably small and immensely large phenomena. I took inordinate interest in particles so small that the mere act of looking at them scatters them like poppy seeds in a tornado. When leaders of the quest to find the meaning of life in the very small found what they thought was the ultimately irreducible building block of the universe, they unabashedly, if not ironically, dubbed it the "God particle."

If the infinitesimally small fails to satisfy, one can always switch to the scale of billions and billions. From this macro perspective, we live on a planet that is a mere pale blue dot orbiting an average star roughly two-thirds of the way along a spiral arm of a galaxy. Our galaxy has a quarter of a trillion stars, indistinguishable from the 100 billion other galaxies in the universe that stretch some 100 billion light-years from end to end. In fact, if we walked at five miles an hour, twenty-four hours a day, seven

days a week, it would take 575,856,000 years to arrive at the nearest star outside our solar system.

But how does comparing humanity to the tiny scale of angstroms and the immense scale of light-years help us through the dark nights of the soul? The end result of dwelling in the realm of the microscopically small and the incomprehensibly large has been dehumanization.

I recently listened to a PBS show about traveling to Mars. Thus far, unmanned missions to Mars have failed to find life. Manned missions, the scientists on the show believed, would be more successful at locating life on the Red Planet. One of the show's experts estimated that a manned mission to Mars would cost a half trillion dollars, give or take a half trillion. And what kind of life could we expect to find? A new species of orchids? Little green men? Not quite. Nobel Prizes will be given out like candy at a Shriners' parade if we discover something like the mold that grows in the dark corners of your bathroom. Many atheists believe that the discovery of life beyond Earth will put to rest the notion that God is the creator of life. "See?" they will say. "No need for God. Life just randomly happens."

IN THE BEGINNING

By contrast, the Christian faith offers a very different perspective on humanity. The Bible is not intended to be used as a science textbook, but it nonetheless offers us some clear direction on cosmology. One example is found in the New Testament book of Hebrews: "By faith we understand that the entire universe was formed at God's command, that what we now see did not come from anything that can be seen" (11:3).

In other words, the Bible tells us that once there was no universe, and then God spoke the cosmos (the Greek word often used for the universe in the Bible) into existence using nothing that existed before.

Science didn't agree with the Bible in this area until roughly a century ago. Before that time, scientists insisted that matter could not be created or destroyed and that everything that is seen had always existed. Finally,

after thousands of years, the Bible and science are in agreement about the universe being formed out of nothing.

However, there's still a profound difference between the biblical and scientific view of how we got here. In the biblical worldview, behind every star, every starfish, and every stargazer is an omnipotent God who creates according to a plan. You and I are not the result of a meaningless cosmic accident. We are the result of a divine design.

The Bible includes two accounts of Creation. The first Creation account begins at Genesis 1:1 and continues to Genesis 2:3. This seven-day account generally follows the developmental pattern of life on Earth that any modern evolutionist would accept. It is told in the measured tone of a song or poem, with the repeated refrain, "And God saw that it was good."

The first account is linked to the second Creation account with this sentence: "These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created, in the day that the LORD God made the earth and heavens" (Genesis 2:4, ESV).

Up to this point, God has spoken everything into existence—in seven days, generations, or an instant. This ambiguity reminds me of the zigzag architects put on a straight line when they wish to signal that the line continues, but *NTS*, or "not to scale."

Indeed, the second Creation account switches scale and perspective: God makes Adam and Eve with his own hands and in his own image. He blows the breath of life into Adam's nostrils. The implication is clear. Adam and Eve are special, outside the timeline and the normal course of the rest of creation. Humanity is the work of God's own hands. If you think that life on Earth took four billion years or so to get where it is now, the Bible gives you room to hold this view. If you believe it took seven days, the Bible gives you a solid place to stand. What it does not yield to either camp is that we are a cosmic accident.

When this biblical worldview soaked into my mind during my late forties, it transformed my outlook from hopelessness to a life of meaning and

purpose. We'll get to the specifics of how the Christian faith can help us to be a force for life in a culture of suicide in part 3 of this book. But for now,

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one of the first and most important things parents can do is to tell their children they are not an accident. Children should be told that they are an intentional creation of God. Their purpose is to discover the plan that God has for their life. In doing so, they will “glorify God and enjoy him forever.”

I suspect that many reading this book did not hear that message as a child. I didn't. In fact, on a number of occasions, my mother told us kids that she wished she'd never had us. Her life wasn't easy, and I don't think she meant to harm her children through what she said, but that was the message we received.

Yet despite her communications and a pervasive secular message that I had no ultimate purpose, I always felt that I was here for a reason. As an atheist, where did this belief come from?

The notion that I was here for a purpose was implanted in my brain when I was five. I remember when it happened. My 103-year-old great-aunt took me by my shoulders, looked me straight in the eye, and said, “God has a plan for you, Matthew. He knows how much mischief you can get into. That's why he's given you two angels.” And then she glanced over each of my shoulders as if she could actually see my guardians.

To this day, I believe that my great-aunt meant what she said. Recalling her words over half a century later still brings me great comfort and joy. She wasn't saying I was a good little boy or telling me I could be anything I wanted to be when I grew up. She was doing something far more important: she was giving me a philosophy of life, the philosophy of purpose. She was nourishing my soul.

Proverbs 15:4 tells us that kind words are a tree of life. My great-aunt planted a seedling in my soul that day that has been sorely tested—through

seasons of drought and disease, troubles and turmoil—but has never died. As a Christian, I am now convinced it will never die.

My aunt could have taught me how I was made up of 37 trillion cells, each of which was made of 100 trillion atoms, which were in turn composed of countless protons, neutrons, and electrons, which in turn were made up of . . . and so on. That knowledge, though true, would not have nourished me as much as telling me I was made by God for a purpose. In short, my great-aunt was the first to tell me clearly and definitively: you are not an accident!

Whether you are a man or a woman, you are made in God's image. You are not an accident or a mistake. You are exactly what God intended you to be. Moreover, you don't have to choose between science and God, fact and faith. God invented science, and science is just catching up to God.¹

You may read the opening chapters of Genesis to mean seven twenty-four-hour days, an instant, or billions of years, but that does not impact why you are here. What must be taken literally is that we are the intentional masterpieces of an omnipotent God—made in his image. We are not mistakes in a vast, seemingly meaningless universe.

Science fiction movies and conjecture to the contrary, life is rare. Intelligent life that writes symphonies and splits atoms is rarer still. Other life may be found on other planets, but so far as anyone knows for a fact, you and all the life on Earth are extraordinary and may be unique. Any statement to the contrary is either pure conjecture or an outright lie. The Bible called the manner in which the universe came into existence several thousand years before science did. I'll go with it. You should too. Sit back and let the idea that you were made by God for a purpose seep into your mind.

SEARCHING FOR MEANING APART FROM GOD

As we've seen, our search for meaning—and where we look for it—has a great impact on our view of life. As an atheist, I subscribed to a philosophy that tried to find meaning in science. But science is just one of the many places we look to find meaning apart from God. An even more popular way is the pursuit of money and possessions.

There is a billboard on the highway near where I live that features a woman holding a shopping bag. “Happy” is the caption over her head. On the same billboard is another picture of the same woman sporting a bigger smile. She is holding three shopping bags. “Happier” is the caption over her head. It’s not an ad for a clothing company or the maker of fancy shopping bags. The ad is for a bank. The message is that this bank’s credit card can help you get more things, and that this will result in you being happy . . . or, rather, happier.

Go ask financial planners (I did), and you will find that their clients who have \$100,000 invested believe they will be happier when they have saved \$200,000. Those with \$200,000 believe they will be happier when they reach \$400,000. Remarkably, the planners say the belief that more money leads to more happiness is not linear. By the time folks have one million saved, they long for the day when they will have three million. Does more money equal more happiness?

Having grown up at and below the poverty level, I know something of economic uncertainty. I was living on my own by the time I was sixteen. It was not always easy. I’ve been so hungry that I’ve eaten out of a dumpster. I’ve also had the income of a physician. In my experience, a certain level of income and economic stability is a blessing.

This past winter, I hit a moon-sized crater in the road. Instantly my tire went flat. It was sleeting and cold. Even so, I literally bowed my head and thanked the Lord. It is a blessing to be in a place where one blown tire does not result in economic disaster—as it would have earlier in my life and as it might for so many others today. However, past a fairly modest income, every study undertaken has shown diminishing returns when it comes to happiness and increasing income.

If more money equaled more happiness, then as one of the richest countries on earth (and in history), the United States would also be one of the happiest places on earth. But sadly, we are not. We are one of the most anxious and depressed societies. Still, the dictum that more money equates to more happiness is one of the most pervasive beliefs in our society. Why?

Some people just like having more and more money even if they have no intention of spending it. These people are known as misers. But for most, more money represents more buying power—like the person pictured on the billboard. More money equals more things. And oh, how many things there are.

In 1970, the average American saw five hundred advertisements a day. Today, we view five thousand. Eight companies alone spent \$28 billion on advertising last year. In 2018, all companies spent an estimated \$151 billion on advertising, or \$462 for every man, woman, and child in the country.² What is being advertised? Everything! Electronics, fast food, beauty products, television, movies, music, coffee, alcohol, clothing—on and on it goes.

Almost everything that we see in ads is sold using one promise. Advertisers for these products and services may say that they will make us more secure, better looking, more popular, and so on, but underneath each of these promises lies the great brass ring. Whether it is a car, a computer, or a cruise to a foreign land, each and every purveyor of a product explicitly or implicitly promises to make us happier *if* we buy their product. Indeed, would anyone buy something if it promised to make us unhappy?

In order to appeal to our longing to be happy, advertisers depict happiness even if they are selling something as mundane as a toothbrush. Models smile while they shave, apply eyeliner, wear new shoes, talk on new phones, and shop online. They smirk with self-satisfaction as they drive new cars down uncrowded city streets or purchase auto insurance from nonexistent insurance stores where animated chameleons and ostriches work.

No one, and I mean no one, grins when they buy auto insurance—even if it is bundled with their homeowner’s policy. These ads are lies or, at best, distortions of the truth. They set up an unrealistic expectation that happiness

—————✧—————

*Perhaps happy and
happier don't come in
shopping bags as we've
been led to believe.*

—————✧—————

can be obtained through buying things. The more ads we see featuring smiling models, however, the less happy our nation becomes. Perhaps happy and happier don't come in shopping bags as we've been led to believe.

FAME GAMES AND CREATURE COMFORTS

Another avenue that promises meaning is the attainment of fame. Perhaps if others like us or follow us or give us the thumbs up, we will have found purpose for our lives. The advent of social media makes this pursuit accessible to all. But judging from the number of celebrities and people at the top of their fields who have committed suicide, fame is not all that it is advertised to be either.

Still another path to meaning is comfort—catering to our physical desires. With enough comfort, we think, we can finally be content. We search for comfort wherever it can be found—in luxuries, in sex, and in food.

I was in a hotel room recently and turned on the television. A reality show was airing about people who weigh more than a quarter of a ton. My heart couldn't help but go out to these people. Once in their lives they were able to do cartwheels and hang upside down at the playground. Now they had difficulty moving from one oversized recliner to another. And what did the ads from this show feature? Fast food—with the announcers telling us that our deepest gustatory cravings could be satisfied in moments. But can the hunger we feel and the recognition we crave be satisfied by any amount of food or any number of “followers”?

WATCHING AND BEING WATCHED

Some search for meaning by trying to be unique. We live in a world that tells us that we can be anything we want to be, and sometimes this almost seems real. From the top of our head to the tips of our toes, if we don't like what we see, we can be something else. It's no longer a matter of growing your hair long if it is short or shaving it off if it is long. Curly hair can be

straightened and straight hair curled. Blondes can become black haired and vice versa, and we can even color our hair like our favorite cartoon characters. Or if we're tired of living in the skin we were born in, we can visit a tattoo parlor or plastic surgeon to discuss options.

If these attempts fail to satisfy, we can always try to escape our lives through entertainment. Each year, Americans spend around eleven solid weeks watching television. We spend another five and a half solid weeks on social media sites. More than half of teens spend another five and a half weeks a year playing games on computer platforms. In total, it is estimated that teens spend 7.5 hours a day staring at screens for entertainment purposes. By the time the average American turns eighteen, they will have viewed 200,000 acts of violence in cartoons, television shows, and movies.³ And apparently, we like to watch other people have sex. Americans watch more pornography than any other country.

Another form of entertainment is sports. We can tune into one of several hundred dedicated sports channels around the globe. Here we can watch solid, semisolid, and compressed air in balls that are hit, passed, kicked, and butted through various artificial boundaries, posts, holes, and hoops twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. We can watch cars, horses, people, dogs, sleds, and bicycles race in lines, circles, and loops.

And if all of these fail to bring us joy, there are always drugs and alcohol, which are another means of escape.

Not all the activities, products, and beliefs mentioned above are bad in and of themselves. But all of these things—when used as an avenue to provide purpose and meaning in life—will ultimately disappoint. They fail to answer the big questions in life: Why am I here? What is my purpose? How will I find meaning and happiness? What happens to me when I die?

No matter how big or small we think, no matter how many ways we choose to distract and entertain ourselves, if our philosophy of life doesn't have answers for these questions, we will have difficulty making it through the tough times that each of us inevitably encounters.

WE ARE ALL LEE BARRETT

What makes it so that one person wants to end their life during a difficult time, while another makes it through? How does one person respond positively to adversity that another finds unbearable? How can both be true in the same person?

Let's revisit my quadriplegic patient. In the case of the Lee Barrett who wanted to die versus the Lee Barrett who wanted to live, both grew up in the same house. Both had the same mother. Both had the same father. Both had analogous educations. Both were raised in the same environment. Both had the same friends. One had health and a job—but that is not the one who wanted to live. The main difference in who wanted to live and who wanted to die was faith. It has long been known that faith plays a protective role when it comes to suicide. Those who believe in God are between four and six times less likely to commit suicide as those who don't.⁴

Why? Does faith make people happier? Are believers more fearful of the consequences of suicide? Are they more likely to take into account the pain they will cause others? Do they find solace in having a God in charge of their lives?

The Christian faith I espouse in this book is not a cure-all. Even as Jesus walked the roads of ancient Israel, he did not cure every leper. As our secular culture forms us, the futile places we search for meaning, like the ones I described in this chapter, affect both those in the church and those without. And as the current rate of suicide increases in our overall population, it will increase in Christians as well—but at a reduced rate from the general population. Indeed, Christianity's protective effect in preventing suicide has been established through multiple studies over the last century. To my knowledge, no exceptions to these findings have been found.

Yet it is also a fact that all of us—those with faith and those without—will face tough times in this life. The Bible and experience confirm that it is not a matter of *if* we experience grief and sorrow; it is *when*. Our health will decline. Our looks will fade. Everyone we love will die. All of the

possessions we worked so hard for will eventually turn to dust. Try as we might, we can take nothing with us to the grave.

From a biblical worldview, we are all Lee Barrett. We all have moments when we wish we were dead. And we all face situations when we would give anything to have another minute with a loved one.

In the next chapter, we will examine the depth, extent, and urgency of our suicide crisis and begin laying a foundation for a path forward.