How to Save a Life

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Chester Bennington is dead.

You may not have known him, but his rasping voice propelled his rap-rock band, Linkin Park, into the dizzying altitudes reserved only for the world's biggest pop acts, to the tune of over 70 million albums sold since their debut release in 2000. Only a handful of artists ever get to define a generation, and Linkin Park provided the soundtrack to the angst-filled turn of the century, ultimately outlasting their gimmicky peers to become rock 'n roll standard-bearers. In other words, they were successful – really, really successful – and the uniquely gifted Bennington was their figurehead. At 41, he had more money than he knew what to do with, years of creativity left, and was adored by literally millions of people. He constantly mixed with the rich and famous, the creative and beautiful, and had the type of success, respect and influence that many long for but very few find. And yet it was not enough. It could never be enough. His life ended far from the stage, in a lonely room, at the end of a rope he'd put around his own neck.

The Suicide Seduction

His isn't the first seemingly senseless suicide in the entertainment industry, and it won't be the last. And yet the utter hopelessness of it is jarring; the knowledge that a man living virtually everyone's fantasy could become so jaded, despairing of his own life so much that he would

actually choose to end it. It comes, though, as part of a wider, more seductive narrative – one in which suicide is becoming romanticised and glamourised. The true distinctive of an increasingly wicked generation is that it plays god to an escalating degree, and we're seeing it lived out in front of our eyes. We've replaced God as the highest authority on sexual norms, gender distinctions and the ultimate meaning of life. What's left? Death. Our society will try to prove that it is greater than God by deciding when and how life will end, and it begins with the demystifying of suicide. Popular teen-centered TV shows, like Netflix's '13 Reasons Why', are bringing suicide and self-harm into the mainstream in a sympathetic and even aspirational way, to the alarm of psychologists who work with young people. Far from exposing the foolishness of killing yourself, the show is virtually inciting it.

And it has picked an opportune time: never before has a generation seemingly cared so little about the future or about themselves. Right now, Western culture seems to consist of one giant exercise in escaping reality, not tackling it. We've created more platforms to do this than we've ever had, and we don't care about their clearly damaging effect on us. We want pleasure now. We also want genuine, deep contentment, but we don't want to ask the big, challenging questions about life that will lead us to it. And so we seek pleasure at all costs, and when the emptiness catches up with us, we stave it off by snatching at fleeting moments of happiness.

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And it's precisely at those lowest points that the devil, that great enemy who Western society no longer seems to believe in, comes not with a scream but with a whisper. Life is worth nothing, he says. We came from nowhere and we're going nowhere. Easier to be dead than to face life's challenges and disappointments. Whatever comes after this will be peaceful, he says. You'll be at rest. That little whisper sets in motion an act that cannot be undone. A person can repent of any other kind of deception and turn towards a new way of living, but suicide draws a line that is final.

The Hope of The Gospel

But we carry a different message; the sound of a different whisper. This life is not the sum total of its challenges, disappointments and missed opportunities, but an opportunity to find God, to 'feel our way towards Him', to borrow Paul's stunning phrase to the Athenian philosophers from Acts 17:27. In fact, Paul told those thinkers – the rock stars of their day – that God put us all in our different nations and different time periods of history so that perhaps we would search for Him, reach out to Him. Imagine a God who would go to all that trouble so that maybe – maybe! – we

would look around us, wonder Who was behind it all, and understand that He's been reaching out to us all along. He sent prophets and holy men, and people despised them. He sent His Son, and people killed Him. 'But God demonstrates His own love for us in this,' said Paul in Romans 5:8. 'While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.' He has loved, given, sacrificed all, so that in this one life we've been given on earth, we'd see our own hopelessness, turn to Him, have our sins forgiven, love Him and live for Him. This is God's message, and it's our responsibility to carry it to a rudderless, untethered and increasingly vulnerable generation.

I'll never forget reading an article about a Japanese man named Yukio Shige, a retired police officer who lives near the Tojinbo Cliffs, a notorious suicide spot. Unwilling to accept the great loss of life there, he has devoted himself to patrolling its perilous terrain every day with a pair of binoculars, approaching any people he sees at the cliff edges. They don't carry any typical tourist souvenirs, he says, but stand alone with their faces staring at the ground. He greets them, starts up a conversation and begins to gently speak to them about their life. He might touch their shoulder lightly as he speaks, or offer them a warm bowl of noodles, like they used to have growing up. As of the writing this piece, he and the volunteers who join him have saved almost 600 lives.

The article never said what worldview drives Yukio Shige's desire to reach out to strangers and save their lives – whether it's simply his way of contributing to society or if there's something deeper. But at the end of the story, the reporter noted that Shige's cell phone had rung, and its ringtone was unmistakably familiar:

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me
I once was lost, but now am found
Was blind but now I see

> The church is called to patrol the jagged cliffs of this earth

The church is called to patrol the jagged cliffs of this earth; to place itself in the middle of the vast emptiness and engage with the desperate. And they're not just on street corners carrying cardboard signs and needle-marks, or on stages singing songs of hopelessness – they're occupying wood-paneled offices, wandering around skate parks, standing behind counters, jogging across sports fields, sitting in salons, working in classrooms and dozing in old age homes. They're everywhere. And so we reach out everywhere, to everyone. Forgiveness of sins, communion with God and grace to live has been freely offered to the likes of us, and we know that without it, life genuinely has no purpose and no meaning.

Chester Bennington is dead. Everything this world had to offer him was just not enough; it could never have been enough. But the generation that sang along to his songs of loss, anger and isolation cries out for a new song to sing – a song of grace and hope. And we know the tune.