

Life After Attempted Suicide

Kristen Anderson lay on railroad tracks hoping to end her life. Instead, she heard a song that changed everything.

On a bone-cold night in January 2000, Kristen Anderson made an impulsive decision: She walked to the railroad tracks not far from her Chicago home, lay facedown on the ground and let 33 freight cars roar over her body at 55 miles per hour.

The engineer frantically blew the whistle and brought the train to a halt on top of Kristen's body. The botched suicide attempt left the 17-year-old in piercing pain. As she lay there in her own blood, trying to decipher whether she was dreaming, Kristen managed to pull herself from under the train and crawl to some nearby rocks.

She looked around, patted the ground and suddenly realized her legs were gone. Kristen's left leg was severed above the knee, and her right leg was cut off just below the knee. Both limbs had been thrown 10 feet away from her frail frame.

But right there, in the darkest hour of her life, the teen had an encounter with God. He had foiled her plans and instead of taking her to heaven as she hoped, He invited her to a heavenly concert for one, and Kristen heard the lyrics to the hymn "Amazing Grace."

"A song filled my heart" she says. There was no clear voice, yet the words were sharp and clear, playing 10 times louder than the music, Kristen, now 27, tells readers in her new book, *Life, in Spite of Me: Extraordinary Hope After a Fatal Choice*.

Before that moment, Kristen didn't realize she could turn to God with the pain she was feeling. "I didn't know at the time in my life that I could go to God for comfort, strength, wisdom and understanding," she told *Charisma*. I stuffed it all

down inside.

She was just a sophomore in high school when her world began to feel overwhelming. In 1998, her close friend's older brother was killed in a motorcycle accident. That same year, another friend on her high school's football team was killed in a car accident. Then her grandmother died unexpectedly in 1999. The same year, Kristen was stalked by two boys, then raped by a third young man she considered a trusted friend.

"It was too much," Kristen says. When my grandmother passed away, my family didn't talk about it. It just got really quiet in our house, and I didn't know what to do with my feelings and how to handle them. And then I was raped.

To look at Kristen today, it's inconceivable that she would have tried to kill herself. She wears a bright smile and seems secure in her relationship with Christ. But in 1999 she faced yet another loss that would plant the seeds of her suicidal thoughts.

The Valley of the Shadow of Death

Kristen says she was stunned by the death of her childhood friend Brandon. He had been using drugs and stopped hanging out with her and his friends. But what shocked her most was the way he died. "He took his life by hanging himself in a cemetery, which was just a morbid, graphic, extreme way, and I just didn't understand it at all."

But she says her thought process started shifting. "It was when I was struggling through his death, wondering how he could ever do it, that I thought I could never do it the way he did it," she says. "I started thinking, '*If I didn't do it that way, how would I do it?*'"

Kristen now believes Satan planted lies in her mind, telling her she wasn't worthy to live, that no one would miss her and that her life no longer mattered. But at the time, she saw no

end to her torment other than suicide. She began plotting her own death, trying to decide how she wanted to die, what would work and what wouldn't.

Kristen was lying in her bedroom one night pondering a handful of ways to kill herself when a train passed by. As she heard the whistle and felt the house vibrate, she decided that would be a sure way to die. The thought didn't return until later when she was sitting in a park trying to push back the pain she'd been feeling for months and heard a train nearby. Thinking she could quickly end her misery, Kristen stood up from the swing set and rushed to the tracks.

"I felt hopeless, and I didn't want to be here," she says. "I took such an extreme route because I just didn't trust any other route. I figured this was the only way I could die."

Kristen knows today it was God's plan for her to live and tell others about Him, but initially she was angry with the paramedics for saving her life. She has had multiple surgeries and is being fitted for prosthetics. But recovering from the physical wounds was just part of the battle. Even after she accepted Christ in 2001, her struggle with deep depression continued.

Up From Depression

The Anderson family has long battled depression. Kristen describes her father's long-term struggle with the illness as "a large, dark object that everyone tiptoed around." When she was 15, just two years before she tried to take her own life, Kristen learned that her father's mother also was depressed and that his uncle had killed himself. But the Andersons are not alone.

According to the National Institute for Mental Health, approximately 58 million people in the U.S. have depression. And although women are twice as likely to be depressed as men, people in middle- and low-income households are reportedly

less likely to be treated for the disorder because they cannot afford to get help.

The Centers for Disease Control says depressed individuals experience feelings of sadness or anxiety that last for weeks at a time. Symptoms of depression include but are not limited to feelings of helplessness, sadness, guilt and fatigue. Depressed people often lose their interest in everyday activities; they may gain weight or lose it, and may have thoughts of death and suicide.

Kristen encourages people to seek counseling if they are depressed, a topic that often draws mixed reactions among believers. Many Christians believe depression is often a form of demonic possession, but Kristen says Christians shouldn't be so quick to blame all depression on demons.

"I think that anyone, Christian or not, can fall into depression, even me," she says. "It would be naive of me to think that I'm all good, and I'm covered, and nothing will ever happen to me or go wrong or that Satan will never try to mess with me again.

"It's so easy for him to get into our minds and make us believe that we don't matter. Knowing that those things are not true is critical because you cannot fight the lies if you don't know ... what the truth is."

She learned about the enemy and how to defeat him in 2003, after she joined The Chapel, a nondenominational church located outside Chicago. There she began to see Satan at work in her life, feeding her the lies that provoked her suicidal thoughts.

Unlike the church she grew up in, The Chapel was full of love, and the people there seemed to love life and have joy, Kristen says. She became involved with the young adult ministry and started working with preschoolers and high school students. Church members would hold her accountable, and she felt she

was where God wanted her. "Satan was out to destroy me," Kristen says. "But when I got involved with the church, I got off my pain medication and antidepressants. That was the biggest surprise to my family."

The Chapel pastor Jeff Griffin says Kristen was still suicidal and hopeless when she began attending the church, and he has watched her become joyful and content. "It would be too easy to be filled with self-pity in her situation, yet Christlike servanthood is what flows out of her heart," Griffin says. "The level of transformation that has occurred in her life can be explained by nothing other than a miraculous work of Jesus Christ."

Kristen says she spent three years in Christian counseling and describes herself as a "big fan" of the practice. "I struggled with depression after my suicide attempt because I was a new believer and the enemy didn't want me to grow as a Christian," she says. "But I needed to think through what led me to make a choice like [suicide] ... and what led me so astray."

A recent graduate of Moody Bible Institute, Kristen says every believer must arm himself with spiritual weapons, starting with the Word of God. She also has a message for families struggling with the death of a loved one who committed suicide. "I don't believe suicide is an unpardonable sin," she says. "Jesus died to forgive us of all our sins. He came to set us free, and only God knows what's in the heart of any of us."

"There are some people who accepted Christ and put their faith in Him who ended up in a battle with depression and suicidal thoughts and had their lives end through suicide who are in heaven," she adds. "I do not think that all people who commit suicide are in hell."

Kristen knows it is the Holy Spirit who has given her the peace she now enjoys. She wants others to know that suicide is

never the answer. But her greatest desire is to see people accept Jesus and develop a strong relationship with Him.

That's why she founded Reaching You Ministries in 2004 with a mission to "reach the hurting, the hopeless, the lost, the suicidal and the depressed with the life-transforming hope and leadership offered to us in Christ."

Kristen shares her testimony across the U.S. at churches, colleges, women's and youth events, and suicide prevention outreaches. In 2006, she told her story to millions of viewers on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*.

"When people hear Kristen's story, they cannot deny that God does transform desperate situations," Griffin says. "We are seeing God use Kristen's ministry to bring many previously despairing people into a transforming relationship with Christ."

Kristen's inspiring message of salvation and hope has resonated with her family members. Since her accident, her mother, father and siblings have come to Christ. And she says her father has come a long way in his recovery from depression.

She says God also is moving among the hundreds of people who inundate with emails. Some are hurting or struggling with suicidal thoughts, while others are spiritually lost and need direction. They come to the website hoping to hear some encouragement from Kristen.

Her words to them can no doubt be found in the lyrics she heard on that dark, cold January night when she so desperately tried to end her life: "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."

Valerie G. Lowe is an associate editor for *Charisma*. “*Amazing Grace*” is one of her favorite hymns.

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