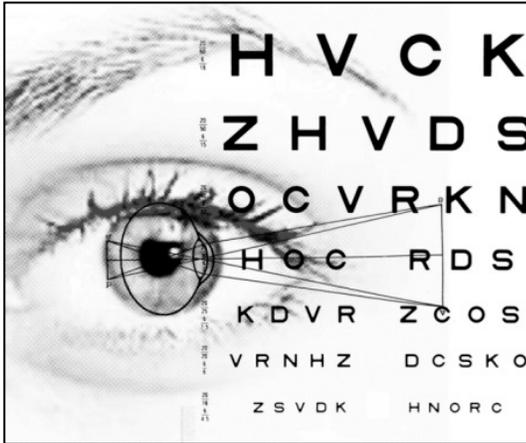


# A Brief Theology of Suffering

what middle school students need to know



In the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE a Greek atheist named Diagoras argued that the god's don't care about humanity. His opponents, pointing at all the paintings of the god's at work, replied, "You think the gods have no care for man? Look at all the pictures of those who escaped storms by praying to the gods for escape." In his sarcasm, Diagoras answered, "Yes indeed, but where are the pictures of all those who suffered shipwreck and perished in the waves?" The topic

wasn't a new one. Job asked the same question 14 centuries earlier when he penned the words "though I call for help, there is no justice." (Job 19.7) Great men have pondered it, argued it, and wished they hadn't been born because of it (Job and Jeremiah). Philip Yancey calls it the "theological kryptonite of our day". [Yancey 1999: 48] When dealing with students, the question of suffering and why it happens, will come up. How we respond is vital. Here are some things to remind them:

Emotions are God given. Life changes fast in middle school and there are very few things that come into their life that they are prepared for. Most students get blindsided by emotions. In their book *Middle School Ministry*, Mark Ostreicher and Scott Rubin, compare middle school emotions to paint colors on a palate. As children and preteens, they really only had the concrete/primary colors to choose from. As they enter, early teenage years, they begin thinking abstractly, and a whole new color palate is given to them, with thousands of colors from which to choose. Our middle school students don't know how to use or what all these new colors mean. Part of our job as middle school workers is to help them understand what these emotions mean and how to express them. Middle schoolers are an emotional bunch, none more so than when they experience pain and suffering. We must act as emotional tutors and help them sort out what they are feeling. We were created to feel and express ourselves as part of the likeness of our Creator (Gen 1.28). Helping them (especially the guys) understand what they are feeling and why is vital to their survival of suffering.

Pain and suffering are part of this fallen world. In the beginning we were created by God to live in a perfect world with Him. When Adam and Eve sinned and disobeyed God, the world and humanity became cursed. The fallen nature of the world can be seen in tornados, floods, cancer, disease, and all kinds of disasters and sickness. The fallen nature of humanity is shown in the choices

they make: drunk driving, murder, divorce, abuse, and all kinds of other horrible things. God hates to see his people suffer, but in his trust of humans by giving them freedom, he allows us to choose what we do. Sometimes the choices we make hurt others. This is the world that we made with our part in the sin of Adam and Eve. It is a part of this world that all of us will feel and all of us are a part of.

Pain and Suffering is a chance for us to hear from God. As suffering comes, some turn their eyes downward and focus on the pain, and others choose to listen to God. C.S. Lewis says that pain is God's megaphone to remind us, not as tool, as though God would torture us to get his message across, but as an amplifier that makes His message louder. Lewis says: "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world." In pain, God's message of unconditional love, of His constant presence, and His power to comfort is intensified. Sadly, some refuse to hear it even then. When students are in the midst of a parent's divorce, or a loss.

Pain and suffering remind us that God is there. If suffering can be used as a megaphone to hear God, it can also be used as a defense of His existence. As I write this, I am typing on my computer. Should this have been put together 100 years ago it would have been hand written and 40 years ago typewritten. If I were writing this by hand I would be very upset at the length of time it takes to write and edit. The same could be said of typing it on a typewriter. The frustration lies not in the manner of technology, so much as, that I know there is a better way to do it. Someone living 100 years ago wouldn't have a problem with writing this by hand because it was the only way, but to know there is a better way is brutal. The fact that pain and suffering hurt us so much is that we know there is a better place and something more. The realization, the longing, and the desire for no more pain or suffering points to our understanding that we were not created for this world of suffering, but a world of peace and prosperity, a world where God is at the center.

In John 9, Jesus meets a guy who was blind from birth. His disciples pose the question, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (John 9.2) The question in not so many words was the same question that has been asked since the time of Job: "Why is this man suffering?; What caused this pain?" Jesus doesn't choose to look at the past cause, but sees what is in the future when he reply's: "Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life." (John 9.3) Jesus, in the midst of this pain, will put on display his identity as "the light of the world." He healed the man, in a living demonstration to the ultimate healing that he can bring. The suffering in John 9, is our own suffering that only Jesus can take from us, so that we too can exclaim with the ex-blind man "One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!" (John 9.25)