



# An **unsolved** Theodicy

**Finding God in the Toughest Times**

By | Brent Parker

“Why do bad things happen to good people?”

The question is as old as Moses...actually, older. I've found myself sitting with teenagers numerous times, trying to make sense of their thoughtful questions of faith:

*Why is God letting my parents get a divorce? Why doesn't God do something about poor people in the world? Where was God when my house was burned down and we lost everything? When will God begin to listen to my prayers and heal my grandma of her cancer?*

These questions, and others, are stirring in the minds of our young people. The same teens that sing praise choruses with us in worship also come to us hoping that we can tell them something that will satisfy their disappointments with God. The only problem with these questions is that they ask them of *us*—people who are themselves wondering about the whys, whens, and whereabouts of God in times of crisis and suffering.

Theodicy is the name that theologians have given this predicament. Simply stated, theodicy says: “How could a loving, omnipotent God allow evil and suffering to exist in the world?”

For centuries theologians have wrestled with this topic and have not yet come up with a satisfactory response. Yet it seems that we, who spend our days telling and retelling our young people of God's love, must consider more fully how we will answer the tough questions that are sure to emerge as our students live out their lives of faith.

## **Where Is God When It Hurts?**

It was 8:15 p.m., and my wife and I had just sat down to watch television. The phone rang. It's not uncommon to get phone calls in the evenings, but the sound of Jenny's voice on the other end



## ▶▶ The same teens that sing praise choruses with us in worship also come to us hoping that we can tell them something that will satisfy their disappointments with God.



of the phone immediately knotted my stomach.

“Ryan has been in a bad accident!”

Jenny, who was calling from her college dorm room in another state, began to share with me that her boyfriend, another former member of our youth group, had been involved in a head-on collision on his motorcycle just minutes ago and was being rushed to the hospital. As best I could, I assured her that he would be all right.

Hoping that all truly would be all right, I waited until the morning to go to the hospital to visit. I walked into the emergency room and was immediately aware of the deep sadness that was in the room. Ryan’s dad walked over to me to say that things were not looking good. I tried to find words that would calm the restlessness of his heart. His only son, Ryan, had returned from the Navy and had immediately found a home in the church as a youth ministry volunteer. Ryan was a delight. Kind, gentle, and a young man of sincere faith, he certainly didn’t deserve this horrible event.

After talking with the family and with Jenny, I was invited to go up to see Ryan who was now in a coma. Nothing could have prepared me for what I would see when I walked into the ICU. Walking slowly, with Jenny’s hand firmly

grasped, we approached his bed. I will never forget the image of his swollen body lying in that bed. I encouraged Jenny to talk with him because I’d been told he might be able to hear what we were saying. After some small talk and poor attempts to break the deep grief we were feeling, I reached out to grab Ryan’s hand, encouraged Jenny to take his other hand, and together offered a prayer. I don’t remember what was said in that prayer. I clearly recall, though, hoping that our prayers for healing would be heard and responded to in the manner in which we were requesting. I returned home.

At 1:15 a.m. the next morning, Marilyn informed me that Ryan had died. What was I going to say now to his dad, his girlfriend, and his friends? I had been telling everyone that our loving God would take care of Ryan and would help him through this. Had I lied to them? Had God let us down? How could I have been so naïve to give this family such a false sense of hope? I wasn’t sure what I would say to them when I arrived at their home later that morning. We never do know quite what to say.

### **The problem With Theodicy**

My experience with Ryan’s family and friends is no isolated event in the life of a youth minister. We are met with tragedy, sadness, dis-

appointment, and struggle on a fairly consistent basis as we walk alongside young people in their journeys of life and faith. Where do we go to find good answers to these difficult questions? How do we give answers to teens when we ourselves are quite unsure about how satisfied we are with those same answers?

Reconciling the great goodness and power of God with the great pain, evil, and suffering in the world is no small task. Countless attempts have been made to get a handle on this profound mystery of faith. I have encountered (and, embarrassingly offered) three insufficient responses to this dilemma.

First, we might suggest that God is good and all-powerful, but we deny or minimize the reality of the suffering that is being endured. Have you considered telling a teenager that the pain she’s feeling isn’t really as bad as she says it is? Though I’ve been tempted to minimize the “tragedy” of the junior high guy who has had his heart broken or to smooth over the high school girl’s pain of not being invited to the prom, I’m aware that these events, in their own ways, are deep concerns for the kid who has brought them to me.

Our next option is to agree that God is all-powerful, to concede that suffering and evil exist, but



## “Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so. Little ones to him belong, they are weak but he is weaker.”

not to affirm the goodness of God. I have a hard time trying to convince a young person that the God of the Bible who is the giver of every good and perfect gift is only occasionally interested in being good to humanity. We have spent years reminding the teens in our care how deeply God cares for them, how dearly they are loved, and how God plans not to hurt them but to give them a hope and a future.

Finally, we could suggest that God is good, that suffering and evil exist, but that God's power is limited. Try teaching your next Sunday school lesson on how weak God is. The song might go like this, “Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so. Little ones to him belong, they are weak but he is weaker.” Our competitive culture has maintained for too long that God is a winning God for us to begin to suggest anything to the contrary. Even those who concede that God places self-imposed limits find themselves needing to explain why God “lets” some things happen and “stops” others.

### Four Approaches to Theodicy

Each of these answers somehow falls short when we find ourselves seated across from one who is in the midst of crisis. In efforts to avoid the defeatist attitude of saying, “I don't know,” theologians have offered four approaches to theodicy that can result

in healing for those caught in a crisis. I offer these thoughts not to lead you to any one of them; rather, my hope is that you'll find them helpful as you create your own understandings that will be helpful to your young people.

*Protest Theodicy:* Considered deeply by John Roth, after being inspired by Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel, this position gives permission to the believer to be “for God by being against God.”<sup>1</sup> Further, we must take our own experiences seriously. This means that we give as much attention to our questions of God as we do to the blessed assurances of God. This theodicy is helpful for those who have been under relentless oppression, and who feel that God has not been faithful to God's side of the covenant.

*Process Theodicy:* John Cobb and David Griffin, well-known representatives of this theodicy, claim that, “the power of God is persuasive rather than coercive.”<sup>2</sup> This thought process suggests that the power of God is limited because God limits it. Free will of humankind is enmeshed with God's power in a way that allows the will of humans to sometimes prevail. In fact, because God cannot always overthrow evil, it is possible that God is somehow “indirectly responsible, however, God is not blameworthy.”<sup>3</sup>

*Person-Making Theodicy:* One of this theodicy's primary representatives, John Hick asks people of faith to consider that some evil and suffering may actually be God “sharpening our edges,” providing an opportunity to grow spiritually. He suggests that we must have the opportunity to make decisions between good and evil and to suffer so as to experience the full freedom that is given to us by God. Whereas process thinkers would claim that all of God's actions are to display love, “Hick refuses to qualify the power of God working as love.”<sup>4</sup> Dr. Paul Brand, famed doctor for leprosy patients, recognized that it is through the feeling of pain that his patients are even capable of healing. Pain is, in fact, a gift to these patients who lose their very fingers and toes because they don't feel pain. When we stop to consider that the pain we suffer might, in fact, be God's gift to us, our fitting response becomes acceptance and even gratitude.

*Liberation Theodicy:* A theodicy that became much more thoroughly discussed during the Civil Rights

struggle of the 1950s and 1960s, this tradition suggests that God is at work in the midst of evil and suffering, struggling alongside humankind in the fight against evil and suffering. James Cone, in his text *God of the Oppressed*, claims that, "God grants 'power to the powerless to fight here and now for the freedom they know to be theirs in Jesus' cross and resurrection.'"<sup>5</sup> This theodicy approaches the problem of pain and evil with a confidence that to be liberated by God is to participate in "redemptive suffering."

### Living With The Mystery

After looking at three insufficient responses, considering four thoughtful theological approaches, and still scratching our heads, how do we accompany our young people in the most difficult experiences of their lives? We embrace the mystery of our God. We find confidence, as Martin Luther King, Jr. did, that "no matter how things appear at any given moment, God reigns."<sup>6</sup> We consider, as G. K. Chesterton would encourage us to do, "that whoever is responsible (for our world) is a fierce and incomparable artist beside whom all human achievement and creativity dwindle as child's play."<sup>7</sup> Our creating and redeeming God challenges us, as Job had been: "If I, as Creator, have produced such a marvelous world as this, which you can plainly observe, can you not trust me with those areas that you cannot understand?"<sup>8</sup>

I find it helpful to look back through the delightful text *Dangerous Wonder* by one of our friends, Mike Yaconelli, whose death was itself an event that stirred thousands of us to question this mysterious God's will. Mike talks about a God who spends as much time chasing us, as we will ever spend chasing God. He describes a God who is delighted by our questions, patient when we are unable to understand the answers, and always with us as we seek to make sense of it all.

In the poignant way that only Mike could speak to the youth worker, he says, "The church exists to guard the important questions! Keep them alive! When the questions are kept alive, our souls have a chance of staying alive. The church should be full of Christians who seek questions rather than answers, mystery instead of solutions, wonder instead of explanations."<sup>9</sup>

If we are to listen to this prophet of the past (and I suggest we do!), we'll continue to find creative, compassionate, caring, thoughtful, faithful, and authentic ways to accompany young people into the full mystery of God and to find the confidence within ourselves to sit in the midst of that mysterious Presence with them. 🍷

Brent Parker is the founder of This Way Ministries, an effort to accompany congregations in the formation of life-giving youth ministries. He has served the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) as a local youth minister and camp and conference director. He is also a featured speaker and worship leader for Disciples of Christ, United Methodist, and Presbyterian churches.



<sup>1</sup>Roth, John. "A Theodicy of Protest," in *Encountering Evil: Live Options in Theodicy*, ed. Stephen T. Davis (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), pp. 11, 19.

<sup>2</sup>Migliore, Daniel. *Faith Seeking Understanding* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), p. 112.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 112

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 113

<sup>5</sup>Cone, James. *God of the Oppressed* (New York: Seabury Press, 1974), p. 183.

<sup>6</sup>Yancey, Philip. *Soul Survivor: How My Faith Survived the Church* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), p. 30.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p.49

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 72

<sup>9</sup>Yaconelli, Michael. *Dangerous Wonder: The Adventure of Childlike Faith* (Colorado Springs, Colorado: Navpress, 1998.), p.42.