

Out of Africa

Are we teaching our children a theology of suffering?



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Nearing the five-year mark of my family's foray into Uganda, here's a mind-bender from my happy and ever-inquisitive four-year-old, Jonathan: "Daddy, when you grow up, are you going to be dead?"

Of course, death can have an eerie familiarity in Africa. But besides the loss of a cat or two, my family has not really experienced great personal hardship.

Uganda is relatively stable, but Jon and his mother did once spend a night trapped in Kampala, unable to get home after unexpected civil unrest. Gunshots later came close enough to our home that the kids wondered aloud why they couldn't see "the fireworks."

Still, there's a great treasure in Jon's question. And it's true that kids, especially so-called "third culture kids" or "missionary kids," are so very desperate to understand our paradox-riddled world.

On one hand, they understand better than most the breadth of the human family. On the other, they might later not really feel at home in their home cultures.

Interestingly, the world ("Hey, it's great what you guys are doing over there") can be more supportive than some inside the Church ("You can go if you want, but don't subject your kids to that kind of suffering").

"We need to teach our kids a theology of suffering," is how it was recently put to me by an Australian national director of a global mission whose 20-something son has left the faith.

Immersed in the Arab world during his formative years, the man's son saw plenty of people suffer. "Eventually he just couldn't reconcile that with a loving God," his father told me.

What should we make of that?

We know suffering is often caused by humanity's fallen nature. Or, in the case of Job, by spiritual forces we can't fully understand. And we know God's purpose is often to help us become, as Jesus, wounded healers for others. But that doesn't lessen the pain.

At a recent gathering in the Netherlands of missionaries from around the world, I listened to a Korean husband and wife share in hushed

tones about the drowning of their 16-year-old daughter in Jordan during an outing for her birthday. They watched their girl struggle in a submerged rock cleft for three hours before she gave her last goodbye.

Or consider the copy of the *New York Times* at my feet. The paper boasts it has 908,559 subscribers earning at least \$100,000. Turn some pages and learn that a billion people still don't have even a pot to call their own. Rural Africa has the world's fewest toilets, but open defecation is worse in dense cities of the Indian subcontinent where four in 10 people have no other option.

Or consider that I'm writing from America's Pacific Northwest where I've just walked the cool ocean beach—sand and stone and sun testifying to God's creative sovereignty. My runners dry against a wood stove, an idyllic scene while I'm here for post-graduate studies to improve... myself.

Why wasn't I born a lame beggar like Julius? He's a frail Ugandan I recently helped get rubber knee pads, so his boney knees don't scrape to raw flesh as he crawls over the rough streets of Kampala. He's waited years for even this small comfort.

Yes, life's first great truth may be that life is hard. But why is it all so arbitrarily selective? And, to return to Jon's question, where is eternity in all this?

There are some 419,000 global missionaries according to the Centre for the Study of Global Christianity. That suggests there may be a million or more missionary kids dealing with these kinds of issues. But, really, regardless of where we live, nobody gets off Scot-free. None of us can protect our kids from this world's pain.

Nor should we. The biblical and healthy and loving approach is to acknowledge without pretense that sometimes there are no answers. And hold onto Christ's comforting assurance that "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart, I have overcome the world."

So, Jon, to answer you, I really don't know. But my prayer for you and your two sisters is that you would be neither cold to suffering nor overwhelmed by it. And that you'd never stop asking such great questions.

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