

BLOG

DYSTOPIAN DISCERNMENT

Through stories, children and adults can vicariously experience the victories of wise choices and the consequences of foolish decisions. Stories, however, can also be a dangerous influence of evil disguised as good. This deceptive tactic is as old as time. The devil in the Garden of Eden reshaped the story about God's goodness by subtly placing doubt in Eve's mind about God's intentions and authority.

Learning how to discern between such subtleties is one of the most essential responsibilities in the Christian life. In a world of evil, where lawlessness abounds, the trustworthiness of authority is currently being challenged, and in many cases, rightfully so. However, in the Garden of Eden, God's authority and boundaries were to protect and provide a pathway for healthy relationships between God and man and man and man. Because Adam and Eve no longer trusted in the goodness of God and the trustworthiness of His boundaries, they chose to follow their desires and rebel against His authority. They believed the lie of entitlement and traded utopia for a dystopian future.

The same is being experienced today. While it is understood that Utopia is not the Christian goal for this life, unfortunately Dystopia (an imagined totalitarian state or place that motivates rebellion and restoration for a new rule of law) is attracting youth and adults at alarming rates. Stories such as the *Game of Thrones* by George Martin, *Year One* by Nora Roberts, *Restore Me* by Tahereh Mafi, *Literature*® by Guillermo Stitch, *Iron Gold* by Pierce Brown, *Red Clocks* by Leni Zumas, *Red Queen* by Aveyard, *Black Blood* by Hennessy, *Hunger Games*, *Maze Runner*, and *Divergent*, to name only a few, have attracted not just an entire generation, but three generations! Why? As the world continues its descent morally, ethically, and legally, loss and need become greater.

Once there is a loss of liberty, dignity, and safety, dystopian heroes are perfectly suited to win the day. The problem is that they win the day without absolute authority, thus giving the authors divine rule. They become a law unto themselves and the oppressive forces that they blame, namely parents, police, government, and God, are to be overthrown at all cost. Without moral boundaries governed by absolute truth, people will do that which is right in their own eyes.

The violent and sexual content and characters of many dystopian novels have become the new rule of order without any absolute moral law for governance. From a casual observation over the past five years, dystopian literature is having a deleterious effect upon mankind's ability to discern between good and evil. Teachers, philosophers, theologians, and even modern day pastors, present dystopian literature as a helpful tool to cultivate a balanced view of good and evil. Martin Stewart writes,

The essence of a dystopian world is the stripping away of the comforts and securities we take for granted. Experiencing that kind of privation through a book demands that the reader considers the means by which humanity could be maintained in such adversity—in other words, what it means to be human without the structures of civilised society to guide our behaviours.

Martin Stewart's supposition is dangerously flawed. The result of being human without the structures of civilized society to guide behavior is already recorded in Genesis 4-9: "The earth also was corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with violence" (Gen. 6:12). And God destroyed the entire human race except for eight.

The themes of love, compassion, courage, and friendship that dystopian heroes promise as the new rule of order sound good in a story, but do not work in the real world. Dystopian literature and films promote love without absolute truth which leads to hypocrisy and, eventually, oppression. Some may argue that dystopian stories demonstrate sacrificial love, but the agenda behind their love is to overthrow oppressive authority—and authority in general, that will lead to new structures to govern mankind.

Genuine love enables one to be free of spiritual and relational oppression and free from the lustful corruptions that ensnare and enslave. The combination of God's love and authority motivates obedience as seen in His Son's response to His difficult assignment. The writer of Hebrews expounds upon this truth as he reveals, "Who in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears unto Him that was able to save Him from death, and was heard in that He feared; though He was a son, yet learned He obedience by the things which He suffered" (Heb. 5:7-8). In an age of dystopian influence, God's requirements for His own Son would be considered to be oppressive and tyrannical. Submitting to the will of God under difficult trials demonstrates the highest degree of trust and love. Obedience to the Father's will is where the real battle is won.

The skilled storyteller must perfect his or her greatest work at this precarious crossroad. To discern what is good and what is evil, especially in the midst of difficult circumstances, and especially when the love of God seems so far away, is paramount if we are to trust in the LORD with all our heart and not

rely on our own understanding. It is at the crossroads of suffering and the unknown that children and adults need to be fully convinced that the benefits of a surrendered will far outweigh any temporal inconvenience or loss. As the psalmist reports: “The LORD God is a sun and shield; the LORD bestows favor and honor. No good thing does He withhold from those who walk uprightly” (Ps. 84:11). Can we trust this as a guaranteed truth? If this is true, then what is the purpose of deep and hurtful suffering?

When in doubt, go to Lamentations chapter 3!

Our character of focus this week, Esther, could remain disheartened in a marriage filled with neglect and fear, or choose to be proactive and trust God to redeem her life, her marriage, and her people. She, like Jeremiah in Lamentations 3, was given a difficult and fearful assignment by God.

Who you serve will be dependant upon who you fear the most. Your choices are entirely influenced by who you will fear, either God or man. Dr. Ed Welch wrote a book, titled *When People are Big and God is Small*. How big is your God? What is your view of God? Is He a judge, with eyes looking to and fro, ready to squash you like a bug, if you disregard His rules? Is He a loving and compassionate father who wouldn't hurt a fly? Is He an absentee father? Or is He a Father who loves you so much that words cannot describe it? But with this love, He is committed to discipline and allow you to suffer in order to cause you to grow so that you can be free to enjoy the special gifts and opportunities He has reserved for you.

Remember:

“Our God is a sun and shield; He gives grace and glory and no good thing will He withhold from them who walk uprightly.” Psalm 84:11

“He will make known unto you the path of life; in His presence is fullness of joy and at His right hand are pleasures forevermore.” Psalm 16:11