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Purpose in Pain: John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars* with the Gospel Truth

Jasmine DePalmo and Michael Sherr

T*he Fault in Our Stars*, written by best-selling author John Green, follows two teenagers with terminal cancer diagnoses as they search for meaning to their suffering. As their relationship blossoms, Hazel and Augustus pursue their wish to travel to Holland and meet Peter—the author of their favorite book. Peter seems to understand the teens’ pain and their wrestling with humanity’s impending oblivion, but their visit with him leaves them unfulfilled, with many questions remaining. When Augustus dies, Hazel must face the reality of her lover’s greatest fear and fight to find meaning and purpose in a life marked as a “failed experiment in mutation.” By the end of the novel, Hazel concludes that while life is full of suffering and pain, the main issue is the meaninglessness of it all. While unfulfilled and lost in the agony of a dying world, she resolves that even though oblivion is coming, living with pain is possible, and it is the pain itself that gives one’s life meaning.

Searching for Meaning

In pivotal moments throughout the novel, Hazel and Augustus attend a support group for those impacted by cancer. These teenagers, wrestling with their imminent death and mortality, are misled by a professional helper intending to provide encouragement and support. This support group meets in what is nicknamed “the heart of Jesus” - where Christ’s heart would have been, were He splayed on the church’s architectural inspira-

tion. Patrick, the professional helper and support group leader, emphasizes the meeting place as a reminder that the attendees, cancer survivors and sufferers alike, are deeply loved as they sit in Christ's literal heart. This scene is narrated through the sarcastic lens of young Hazel, and the tone and content of this chapter -rather, what is lacking -brings sorrow to the reflective Christian reader. The group, sitting in a church and gathered in the center of a cross, is encouraged by Patrick to find purpose in *carpe diem* - life in the moment. He calls on the name of Jesus for prayer and remembrance, a token plea, neglecting the actual Gospel of grace rooted in the inerrant Word of God. Despite their proximity to all that would point them to true hope, Hazel and Augustus remain misguided in their search for the meaning of their suffering.

While meeting in the so-called hall of Jesus, Patrick does very little to offer Gospel truth and its application to the group's attendees. The author does not include Patrick's response to Augustus' fear of oblivion, rather, records Hazel's monologue challenging Augustus to simply ignore the inevitability of human oblivion. Patrick, the professional counselor supposed to provide encouragement and direction, loses the opportunity to present sufferers with real hope. Christian readers are left to wonder how different the book may have unfolded had Patrick chosen to share the Gospel.

Gospel Reorientation

We do not learn much about Patrick. The reader is introduced to him as the facilitator of an open-ended support group for teenagers diagnosed with various forms of cancer. New members (like Augustus) join the group regularly, while seasoned members (like Hazel) come-and-go as they cope with the severity of their illness. Everything about the group presents Patrick with considerable possibilities for reaping a harvest through the true source of hope (Matthew 9:35-38). Yet, Hazel shares that Patrick resorts to recounting, "for the thousandth time his depressingly miserable life story," as he begins the group each week. Once upon a time, Patrick was also dying from cancer, but survived to adulthood and earned a master's degree. But what Patrick believes to be a story that instills hope, the

teenagers receive as a pathetic, narcissistic plea to view him as an example. Patrick then follows his cancer story with a guided discussion, encouraging the teenagers to determine the purpose of life for themselves.

Imagine Patrick's effectiveness if he began each group sharing his testimony rather than his cancer story. Instead of focusing on himself, Patrick could share about his relationship with Jesus Christ. He could share how Jesus transformed his perspective on pain and suffering, how God's Word informed his faith in the assurance of life after death, and how he has made an impact serving teens affected by illness. Patrick could then transition from his testimony into asking the group how each member views their pain and suffering. He could ask them to share what they believe about God. The group could explore their beliefs regarding creation, the fall, sin, heaven, and what it means to have faith--with Patrick unashamedly reinforcing his faith in the death, burial, resurrection, and ascension of the Lord's Son. Hazel and others describe real hardships, real grieving, and real moments of joy during the group. Instead of ending the hour with a hollow prayer to a God they don't know, Patrick could lead the teens to pray to the real Lord who comforts all, so the teens can comfort each other in turn, as they are immersed in deep joy and intense suffering (2 Corinthians 1:3-7).

The kind of support Hazel needed was not psychological and emotional. Rather, she needed ontological and theological guidance as she examined the meaning of her existence. It is not a surprise that Hazel made fun of Patrick and remained unimpressed with the group's interactions. Although they met in a location intended to bring the teens as close to God as possible, the group failed to recognize the Creator as both the source of and answer to their questions (Ecclesiastes 3:11). The novel, perhaps unintentionally, reminds the Christian reader that proximity to the Gospel does not equate to having a personal and intimate relationship with Jesus Christ. Like Hazel, we are all in need of the hope and new life that quite literally flows from the heart of Jesus. Jesus Himself deeply sympathizes with our weaknesses, including our physical illnesses, and brings the promise of hope and healing, validated through His resurrection and conquering of death. There is no substitute for this truth.