

13 Reasons Why

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13 Reasons Why, the Netflix show about a beautiful girl who commits suicide, is very popular among the younger generation. Apparently, the show was tweeted about 11 million times in the month after its release on March 31st this year! Reaction among the older generation has been mixed. While film critics gave the show a high rating (86 % on Rotten Tomatoes), educators and parents have been less enthusiastic.

Soon after the show was released, the Ontario Ministry of Education issued a warning to teachers not to use *13 Reasons Why* as a classroom tool because it is “graphic and potentially triggering for vulnerable young people.” Similarly, the Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board issued a warning to families, informing them that *13 Reasons Why* is causing concern in the educational community because (quote): “It has graphic content related to suicide, glamorization of suicidal behaviour and negative portrayals of helping professionals, which may prevent youth from seeking help.”¹ Similar warnings have been issued by organizations such as the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) and the Centre for Suicide Prevention (SCP).

Now, I can imagine some of our readers saying: Why should we even talk about this? Christian families should not have a Netflix subscription and our young people should not even be able to see this. To which I can only respond by saying: Dear reader, most families do have a Netflix subscription these days, and many of our teenagers have already seen the show, with or without their parents being aware of it. So, we should not bury our heads in the sand and pretend that this does not affect us.

Teenage girl

13 Reasons Why is based on a book with the same title by Jay Asher. The book as such can be read in four to five hours. The Netflix show has expanded the story to become a 13-episode drama series. The show tells the story of a teenage girl (Hannah Baker) who dies by suicide and leaves behind a set of cassette tapes to be listened to by the people whom she holds responsible for making her life unbearable – thirteen people all in all. For example, there is a guy who made a “Who’s Hot, Who’s Not” list of all the girls in class and put Hannah down as having the “best ass.” There is a guy who let another guy rape his girlfriend when she was drunk and unconscious at a party, while Hannah was hiding in the room. Later, at another party, Hannah herself is raped by the same guy. And then there is a teacher at school (the guidance counselor) who fails to understand the seriousness of Hannah’s situation when she comes to see him. Later that same day, she commits suicide. All in all, this is a story about a young girl who is full of hope in the beginning but gradually descends into despair as a result of being bullied, betrayed, “slut shamed,” and even raped.

Is there anything positive that can be said about *13 Reasons Why*? I guess a show like this can make us aware of things that are going on in today’s youth culture. It can open our eyes for challenges that teenagers are facing: social insecurity, peer pressure, self-centeredness, resulting in many teens feeling

lonely and vulnerable. From a cinematographic perspective, I can see that film critics give the show high ratings.

However, based on what I've seen (I read the book and I watched the first three episodes) I agree with the many reviewers who have said that this show should not be on the list of recommended viewing for teenagers. For various reasons. First, the show glamorizes suicide. Hannah, the main character, is not only a victim of what others have done to her. She is also the hero of the story. The way her situation goes from bad to worse makes her decision to end her life seem acceptable. This is not a message teenagers need to hear, especially not those who are mentally vulnerable and prone to imitate negative behaviour. Second, by sending out the tapes Hannah is basically taking revenge on all the people whom she holds responsible for her death. This is accepted without reservation and there is no indication that taking revenge is morally wrong. On the contrary, it almost seems like suicide – and leaving behind sarcastic suicide notes – is a viable way to teach others a lesson. Third, I have not seen the relevant episodes myself, but I understand that the movie goes into great detail showing the rape events and the suicide, much more so than the book on which the movie is based. There is no good purpose to be achieved by having our teenagers watch such scenes. On the contrary, it may leave lasting images in their memories and plant wrong ideas in their heads.

What should parents do? I would suggest that parents talk with their teenage children and find out if they have seen *13 Reasons Why* on Netflix, if their friends have seen it, if they plan on watching it themselves, etcetera. If it is not an issue in your teenager's life, it is still worth having the discussion. If it seems like your teenager may be tempted to watch the show at some point in time, it may be a good idea to watch a few episodes together, and have a good discussion after each episode. You will probably learn lots about what is going on in the world of young people today. And hopefully you will be able to help your child develop a Christian perspective on these things. Hopefully, your teenager will come to the decision: I do not want to see any more of this.

Youth suicide

Unfortunately, youth suicide has become “a topic” in our day and age. In the news we regularly hear about teen suicide, how it seems to happen more often than before, and how it seems to come in waves. We have all heard the reports about waves of suicides in certain indigenous communities. As I'm writing this article, there is a report in the *National Post* today about Canadian Rangers patrolling the streets of a First Nation village in northern Ontario, with the aim of catching young people before they harm themselves. Each ranger is equipped with a first-aid kit and knife – just in case they need to cut down a child who might be found hanging from a tree...ⁱⁱ That's a pretty depressing situation! However, it's not just in indigenous communities that the rate of youth suicide has gone up. A survey done in 2016 among Canadian youth found that 22 % of them had seriously considered attempting suicide in the last twelve months.ⁱⁱⁱ

There are no numbers on suicidal thinking or suicide attempts by Christian youth, but I do know that in our own circles there are reports that teen depression and teen cutting is on the rise. One really has to feel for the parents among us who have had to go through the experience of discovering that their

teenage son or daughter has gotten into the habit of cutting himself/herself. Of course, we should feel even more compassion for the teenagers themselves who get caught up in this!

It is hard to determine why this horrible trend is affecting Christian teenagers as well. It seems to me that various factors play a role here. One factor is the influence of rock bands that glamorize teen angst, gloominess, and even death. For example, there is an American rock band with the name Teen Suicide (what a name) who brought out an album entitled *I will be my own hell because there is a devil inside my body* (what a title).

Another factor is the effect of social media. Our kids are always online, texting with friends, posting stuff on Facebook, reading what everybody else is saying on Twitter and other social media. Even when the kids come home after school, they cannot “turn off” because they always have their phone with them. Of course, another effect of always being “connected” is that there is less opportunity for family time and for personal devotions. The last thing you do as a teenager before you go sleep is not to read your Bible and pray but to check your phone and tweet something. A teacher at one of our Christian high schools told me that she has seen a significant rise in students living with anxiety and depression during the last ten to fifteen years. I’m afraid that we as parents have been quite naïve about the effect that social media has on the lives of our teenagers.

Help

What can we do to help Christian teenagers who are struggling with depression and suicidal thoughts? I don’t have much space anymore but let me make a few suggestions. First, talk to them and remind them of the promises of God, signed and sealed in their baptism. Remind them that the Triune God has adopted them as his children. This is such a rich reality: you are a *child of God* (God in heaven is your Father), you *belong to Jesus Christ* (He bought you with his precious blood), you are a *temple of the Holy Spirit* (He dwells in you to comfort you). Second, urge them to do what needs to be done: flee from anything that promotes negativity and destruction (stop listening to those songs, stop watching those movies) and instead, seeking the Lord while He may be found. It means following the example of David who wrote: You have said, “Seek my face. My heart says to you, “Your face, LORD, do I seek. Hide not your face from me” (Ps. 27:8,9) Third, urge them to believe that God is the giver of life, even life eternal. Urge them to believe that the Son of God, Jesus Christ, is the resurrection and the life. Urge them to take the words of David and make them their own: “I believe that I shall look upon the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living!” (Ps 27:13). Finally, as parents and teenagers we are part of the communion of saints. Seek help within the Christian community! There are Christian counselors and Christian counseling organizations. Ask your pastor, and he should be able to recommend someone to you.

ⁱ See <https://www.hwdsb.on.ca/blog/13-reasons-why-suggestions-for-families/>

ⁱⁱ Douglas Quan, “Volunteer Rangers on lookout for suicide.” *National Post*, June 29, 2017.

ⁱⁱⁱ Report Teen Talk 2016, see <http://globalnews.ca/news/2925079/22-of-canadian-teens-considered-suicide-this-past-year-kids-help-phone/>