

Rachel Scott was the first high school student killed on April 20th 1999, in what became known as the Columbine Massacre. She looked down the barrel of a gun held by a class mate who asked her, "Are you a Christian?" She said "yes" and Dylan Klebold pulled the trigger four times blasting Rachel Scott into the presence of God. When her parents read Rachel's journal she told about five of her closest friends who had distanced themselves from her a year earlier because of her increasing commitment to her faith. She was occasionally mocked by her peers, including Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold the two responsible for the deaths of 12 students and 1 teacher on that dark day. One year to the day before her death Rachel wrote: "Now that I have begun to walk my talk, they make fun of me. I don't even know what I have done. I don't even have to say anything, and they turn me away. I have no more personal friends at school. But you know what, it's all worth it." Why didn't God protect Rachel Scott? She was unashamed of her God yet she died for what she believed. Why did God let this happen to such a beautiful young Christian?

Today I want to take up one of the most frequently asked questions in life. "Why does God allow suffering?" No matter who you are or where you came from we are all required to attend the same school. It's called the University of Adversity. There are no electives. All the courses are required courses. In 1 Pe. 4:12-19, Peter offers some timeless truth about tough times. His first word of advice to those who are suffering for their faith is, "Don't be surprised." v. 12.

Expect trials. It seems that our universal response to trials is surprise. Our surprise usually comes in the form of a question, "why?" Why this? Why me? Why now?

One of the challenges of dealing with a passage like this is how we define adversity. When Peter refers to "the fiery ordeal" he is describing the kind of brutality unleashed on Christians by a mad man named Nero. He not only accused the Christians of burning down Rome but he reportedly enjoyed entertaining his friends to the light of Christians burning at the stake.

This kind of 1st century brutality is a far cry from our 21st century trials. It is hard to compare being skinned alive with being unfriended on Facebook. Peter is speaking specifically about the trials of persecution, about which most of us know very little firsthand. Some of us may have suffered a little rejection, ridicule or slander because of our testimony. A few may have lost a job because of their Christian stand. Almost none of us have had our property confiscated or been imprisoned or tortured or had loved ones executed because of our faith. But I do think Peter's lessons apply to other forms of suffering as well, and if we ever should suffer for our faith, these timeless truths about tough times are good to know in advance.

We suffer for many reasons:

1. Suffering can be self-inflicted. We can suffer from our own stupidity.
2. Suffering can occur when we come in contact with the sharp edges of a broken world.
3. Suffering can be the consequence of rejecting God's authority.
4. Suffering can be from persecution because the game is rigged. In a world that lies in the power of the evil one, no good deed goes unpunished. Paul told young Timothy, "all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." We may never be threatened with death because of our faith but you will experience opposition if you are faithful. Expect it.

Exult in trials. vv. 13-16. Peter says our trials are a test. Some people wonder why God allows all this sin and evil. Why doesn't He do something about it? He will, but in the meantime, suffering serves His purposes like nothing else. That is why Peter refers to "those who suffer according to the will of God" in v. 19. Suffering can serve God's purposes. How could suffering possibly be God's will? I can think of a couple of purposes God has in allowing suffering:

1. Suffering confronts unbelievers with a constant reminder of the consequences of rejecting God. The state of this world provides undeniable evidence that something is wrong. Pain drives us to God.

2. Suffering confronts believers with a test of faith. There is something about the way we humans are wired that adversity often brings out the best in us. Adversity can also bring out the worst in us. The difference is whether we are seized by a greater purpose worth suffering for.

“Reluctance to face pain is your greatest limitation. There is no growth without change, no change without loss, and no loss without pain... When you interpret your pain as bigger—more important, more threatening, more comprehensive—than your vision, you’ll redefine your vision down to the threshold of your pain.” Sam Chand

Trials can have a positive impact on our lives. Trials prove the authenticity of our faith. "Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours." John 15:20. God uses trials to separate the posers from the players. It's easy to be a Patriots or Eagles fan today but if you're a Cleveland Browns fan you're a REAL fan.

The apostles rejoiced in their trials not because they were masochistic but because they believed that suffering for the gospel proved their faith in Jesus. "And when they had called in the apostles, they beat them and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus." Acts 5:40-42

Trials, properly confronted, strengthen our faith. Faith that can't be tested can't be trusted. In fact, Peter says, "In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ." 1 Pe. 1:6-7.

Trials are used by God in the spreading of the gospel. On January 19, 1981, a group of terrorists called "M-19" broke into the S.I.L. residence in Bogotá, Columbia, and kidnapped Wycliffe translator Chet Bitterman. The communiqué from the terrorists read, "Chet Bitterman will be executed unless the Summer Institute of Linguistics and all its members leave Columbia by 6:00 PM February 19." Wycliffe did not budge. Brenda Bitterman and her two little children waited. On March 7 the terrorists shot Chet Bitterman through the heart and left his body on a bus in Bogota. More than one hundred Wycliffe members in Columbia were given the choice of a new field. None left. And two hundred candidates volunteered to take Chet Bitterman's place. (Piper)

Trials are temporary. "For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal." 2 Cor. 4:17-18. Paul does not deny the reality of suffering. He simply points out that there is a greater unseen reality that is far more consequential than our present circumstances.

Examine yourself in trials. vv. 17-18. When you encounter trials, humble yourself. "God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble." Peter learned this lesson the hard way. "Then Jesus said to them, "You will all fall away because of me this night. For it is written, 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.' But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee." Peter answered him, "Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away." Jesus said to him, "Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times." Peter said to him, "Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you!" And all the disciples said the same." Mt. 26:31-35

When you encounter trials, ask yourself:

1. Is my suffering self-inflicted?
2. Is my suffering "such as is common to man?"
3. Is my suffering persecution?
4. Is my suffering a result of God's chastening? "For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons." Heb. 12:7-8

Entrust yourself to God in trials. v. 19. That's easier said than done. It is easy to say, "I will not renounce Christ, even if it costs my life. I will entrust my life to Him." But as soon as we say that, it makes a whole lot of things in our lives look ridiculous. I will die for you, but I can't find time to sit and read your Word. I will die for you, but I don't have time for prayer. I have done a lot of weddings and I'm happy to say that most young men who say their vows are willing to take a bullet for their wives. It's just putting down the remote that's the hard part.

We are called to live like Jesus did. "For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly." 1 Pe. 2:21-23.

As Christians, we should expect trials, exult in trials, examine ourselves in trials, and entrust ourselves to God in trials, knowing that they are according to His will. One of the ways we can entrust ourselves to Him is by observing communion. Jesus instituted this ordinance so that we would remember His response to trials. He entrusted Himself to His Father.

So, as we prepare for communion I want to remind you of Paul's instructions. 1 Cor. 11:27-32