

# The Courage To Suffer

by Rev. Chuck De Groat

**“The worst sin — perhaps the only sin — passion can commit, is to be joyless.”**

**—Dorothy Sayers, *Gaudy Night***

One of the most penetrating pictures of what the Crucifixion must have been like is found in a favorite movie of mine, *Braveheart*. William Wallace, the courageous patriot who fought to free Scotland from the abusive English, faces an inevitable death. Finally in the grasp of Richard the Longshanks, King of England, Wallace can choose to confess his disloyalty before the enemy king and receive a quick death, or be tortured - a process his accuser calls "purification." The pain would be the worst imaginable. The choice is his, however. Wallace chooses "purification," but the purification would not be what the English had in mind. His death would be the final act in a drama of human liberty, a final choice in a life lived for freedom. Wallace refuses a pain-numbing liquid, so that he might "have his wits about him." Facing great pain square in the face, he prays, "Lord, give me the strength to die well."

It brought to mind deeper layers of what it might mean to "follow Christ" (Rev. 14), the daunting life Scripture calls us to live. As I watched the scene unfold, I considered what I might choose. If the power of avoiding pain is in my hands, it's hard to imagine choosing anything other than relief. There is something ingrained within me that says, "Flee pain. Pain is bad." And yet, Christ chose to enter the pain. "Follow me," he says.

Wallace faces his last challenge from an English Princess who has recently fallen in love with him. She begs him to accept the path of mercy, to declare loyalty to the King so as to receive an easy and quick death. Wallace, whose life has been characterized by taking the hard path, fighting for freedom at all costs, says to the Princess, "Every man dies. Not every man really lives." In his choice to enter the pain, Wallace finds freedom. Not just survival, no, he was really living.

Some people live by mottoes. The bumper sticker says, "Life's a #\$@%&, and then you die." Ask the average "Joe" on the street how life is really going, and he'll likely say something to the effect of "Survivin'." Death stares each one of us in the face. Sooner or later it happens. For many, the key to life is survival. Another bumper sticker says, "In search of the eternal buzz." Translated, "Just numb me and I'll make it."

For the average person, the call to a life of "following Christ" is something incomprehensible. After all, Dad dealt with pain by drinking, Mom by romantic novels, and of course the sins of the fathers are, ironically, passed down even when we insist, "I'm gonna do it better than Dad did." The irony is that in the very same new relationships in which we determine to "get it right," we run up against the same old demons. And so, in an effort to dodge the pain, we choose our anesthetic — sex, fantasy, TV, work — anything to distract us from the sting of hurt, rejection, calamity, shame, guilt, anger and the rest.

Another movie I liked was *The Shawshank Redemption*. Condemned to live in prison for a murder he did not commit, Andy finds himself surrounded by mere “survivors.” But while some sleep at night, Andy chips away at hope. He digs a tunnel to freedom with a tiny rock-hammer and twenty-plus years of bold determination. His words: “Fear can hold you prisoner. Hope can set you free.”

I'm no expert in pain, and I'm no expert in hope. Education takes you only so far, and life counts for a lot. A 29-year-old writing on suffering ... hmmm. I can hear your doubts now: “Chuck doesn't have a clue about pain”; “He's going to need to live a little longer to write about suffering.”

And you're probably right. I don't have a ton to go on - I'm less than half done with this game. But I know enough not to spend this valuable space giving you some airtight theology of pain that will, in the long run, only make you feel more distant from God. Hope is not in philosophical speculation. It's in God, who sends his Son and his Spirit to struggling followers.

Pain hurts. And sometimes there aren't words to express it or to soothe it. Sometimes it is so bad that you just want to curl up in the fetal position and die. An encouraging word is greeted with a growl, “Go away. I don't need your petty advice right now.” Pain hurts so badly that sometimes your heart cramps, your throat tightens, and the world around you becomes surreal. And we cry out, “How long, O Lord!”

I spent time just recently in this dark malaise. It wasn't the first time, and it won't be the last. I'm not embarrassed to tell you that pain has driven me to despair at various times throughout my abbreviated existence. The people who know me best know this, and I've found that in their private times, they ache similarly. The people who don't know me say, “No, not you. You've got it all together” — especially those from the “good old days,” when I couldn't be found without a beer in my hand. Fun-lovin', easy-goin', always good for a joke — just avoiding, ultimately. Avoiding what? Avoiding feeling. To feel things deeply is, quite often, to get caught in an array of conflicting, uncontrollable impulses that bog us down. Our instinct is to numb it when it comes, and to rely on steady things: our positive thoughts, our distractions. “No one will understand,” we think. “No one really cares anyway.”

Another quote from *The Shawshank Redemption*: “Get busy living or get busy dying.” The choice to live — really live — involves trusting God and each other, and embracing pain that, as Phillip Yancey says, awakens you to the fact that you are alive — a living, breathing, hurting, rejoicing, praising, lamenting creature of God on this side of the Promised Land sucking the marrow of life in every way so as to know, deep down, to the core, that you are the beloved of Christ, and not just some predetermined emotionless robot.

I think what strikes me about the movie *Braveheart* is that its name — “Brave heart” — can become our name too. It has much to do with what we actually do with our suffering. Do we run away? Do we use it to solicit pity? Does it become some morbid badge of honor? Do we let it drive us to bitterness? What moves me about William Wallace in this great movie is that he only asks for one thing in his pain: courage. He doesn't minimize the pain, nor does he bask in it.

Rather, Wallace's heart is freed through his choice to face it courageously. Even at the end of his life, as he faces death by torture, he prays, "Lord, give me the strength to die well." It reminds me of the Cross, where Christ accomplished our freedom.

Lord, give me the courage and strength to live and to die well.