



THE COMPASS

A TOOL FOR DISCIPLERS

Trials

Conversation On the Journey

Want to do your disciple a tremendous service? Help him think Biblically about the inevitable trials of life. Paul knew that his people would face many trials. In fact, if you think through the New Testament, you'll find that the majority of letters have as a major concern, the stabilizing of believers during grief, and preparation for impending trials. For example:

We sent Timothy, who is our brother and God's fellow worker in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith, so that no one would be unsettled by these trials. You know quite well that we were destined for them. In fact, when we were with you, we kept telling you that we would be persecuted. And it turned out that way, as you well know. (1 Th. 3:2-4)

So, you, too, must properly orient your disciple for the coming waves of tribulation, because they are coming. Their understanding of God's purpose in trials will determine their ability to persevere, and find equilibrium in the tumult.

1 Peter is loaded with helpful information on this topic. Teach it well, and your disciple will have a framework for a great theology of trials. Before you get into the passage you might want to raise the issue with a question - a question that is, quite frankly, pretty tricky to answer: How do you know when you're in a trial? I wouldn't feel the need to answer it, but rather would use it as a lead into the topic.

Now, with your disciple, open to 1 Peter 1:3-7 and have her read it: Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy He has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade - kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith - of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire - may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.

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This Week's Excursion

While yielding to temptation certainly can sideline a believer, it is often trials not understood or handled properly that can stunt the walk of a new disciple. So much so, we see the apostle Paul constantly trying to warn and prepare his disciples for the rocky road that may lie ahead. Your job is to orient them to a biblical perspective of trials: why, who, when and what for; because if your disciple is serious about following Christ, the trials are coming.

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After reading the passage, have her go back through it and underline what she feels are important words, or concepts. Then ask her about each word she underlined, and why she felt it was important. There's a lot in here, but here are some of the things about trials you will want to point out, if she doesn't point them out first.

“Greatly Rejoice”

Point out this phrase and ask what is the source of rejoicing? The answer is our salvation, which really is our source of comfort and joy in any trial. Though we might lose our job, money, relationships - nearly everything, in fact - this is the one thing that can never be taken from us. It will never “perish, spoil or fade” and is kept safely by God. But since our faith in our salvation is the anchor for our souls, Satan does target this security, and you should prepare your disciple for the onslaught of doubts that often accompany trials.

“May Have Had To”

Ask them why this phrase might be important. The answer is that it shows forethought, and intentionality on the part of God, as it relates to their trial. Ask your disciple, “What is the most painful thing to ponder when you are in a trial?” I'm not sure how they'll answer, but I find that the fear that my suffering is random and purposeless, causes the most discomfort. You want to emphasize that nothing that comes into their lives is random. Even when we are the cause of our own grief, God is the one who decides if we will experience the consequences of our actions. Peter's trial was a result of his own failure, but clearly allowed by God.

“Little While”

Target this phrase next. There is a divinely appointed start and stop time to a trial. Forethought was given, not only to the necessity of the trial, but its intensity and duration.

Next I would ask why Peter uses the phrase “all kinds” to describe trials. The hardest thing about trials is that they don't come in spiritual wrappers. There is no accompanying warning that says, “This is a trial. Apply Biblical principles now.” Rather, trials often sneak up on us as mundane, everyday events. It is usually mundane things that effect people: sometimes they are emotional trials, sometimes physical, circumstantial, or even mental. These things become trials, because we need to continue to believe that God cares, loves us, and is good in all He does, even though we are still suffering.

A trial not only tests our faith - it stretches it - sometimes to proportions far greater than its original size. That's what the next section deals with:

These have come so that your faith - of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire - may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.

Like the gold smelting process, trials heat up our lives, causing impurities to float to the surface and making it possible for our faith to bend and stretch. Which brings up another interesting question you might ask: Why do trials often occur, not when you've been in rebellion, but when you've been trying to walk with God?

Next Steps

If your disciple isn't currently facing a trial, this lesson may not be actionable. But there's always tomorrow.

Really the great skill that would help them is to be able to recognize a trial for what it is early, instead of after a week of grumbling. Challenge them to keep their scanner on.

That way when difficult circumstance arise they will be better able to quickly submit to God and wring out whatever benefit He intends to bring into their lives, instead of fighting and complaining.

Trial

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Because trials prepare you, and grow you, for the next step of your spiritual journey - they enable you to graduate to the next grade. The faith and character needed at your current level, is not what will be required for the next.

You might close by sharing an interesting reality that can be observed at a local hospital. Non-Christians, even non-religious people, will often try to encourage someone seriously ill, by saying things like: "It will all be over soon; it won't last forever; every cloud has a silver lining; all will turn out for the best." Instinctively, they know what a person needs to hear in a trial. Unfortunately, it's a meaningless platitude if they don't know God, with no guaranty of any of those things. But, God in this passage, is saying the same thing, and that makes all the difference in the world, because, well, He's God.

†End

Side Trails

The Power of Suffering: Strengthening Your Faith in the Refiner's Fire. John MacArthur. Cook Communications.

Where Is God When it Hurts? Philip Yancey. Zondervan. Order at Christianbook.com



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