

When is the last time that something or someone surprised you? Was it a good surprise, or was it a bad surprise? If we were able to weigh the two types of surprises on a scale, I imagine the bad surprises would far outweigh the good ones, right? Because of the advent of the social network and websites like You Tube, it is easy to look up the good surprises that happen to people every day, and some of them are wonderful.

This being Memorial Day weekend, one of the consistent images of a wonderful surprise are children, spouses, or families who are unaware that a loved one has returned from serving overseas. Many have seen the video of school children at an assembly or at a class party who are unaware that their soldier Dad or Mom is about to make an appearance, and when it happens, the response of these children is deeply moving. There are also hilarious surprises, such as the “kiss cams” at major sports events, or the public scenes where someone springs a proposal on their significant other at a public venue, with the happy response of the one being asked and the loud cheers of the crowd.

But we also know that for every happy surprise, there are countless unhappy ones. Speaking of arena cams, there are plenty of videos of public marriage proposals that are turned down, and at a minimum, these scenes are embarrassing. But the unhappy surprises we witness in this world are minimal compared to the tragic surprises that, at least for me, are generally unwatchable. In fact, I try my best to avoid them. The other day I came across the raw video of a reporter at the scene of a terrible accident in which a woman is killed. As she is interviewing witnesses, she talks to a man who has just arrived on the scene. As the conversation continues it becomes apparent that the man is the husband of the woman, who inadvertently learns from the reporter that his wife has died.

The husband's response is beyond description, and it made me regret having watched the video in the first place.

Horrible surprises, as much as we wish they would not happen, can also teach us. I have been a motorcycle rider for years – since I was a teenager. Any rider knows the dangers that are integral to riding; but it is one thing to know what can happen; it is another to see it, and to see it multiple times. Because of personal video cameras like the Go Pro, a number of motorcycle fatalities are now being recorded by the riders themselves, almost like a final bequest to both motorcyclists and automobile drivers.

Several years back a father in England published a video of the final scenes of his son's motorcycle accident; not out of any sense of morbid grief, but to teach other young people the tragic surprises that can happen when one is riding at extreme speeds. The video, that quickly went viral, shows the young rider talking to the camera. As the rider speaks, he increases the speed on his extremely fast and powerful bike to well above 90 mph on a two-lane road. Like the rider, we see the brief glimpse of a car just before it pulls out in front of the bike. All we hear next is a shocked voice crying, "Woah," and the rider's view of him flying through the air and landing in the grass, with no further movement or sound – just the blades of grass at eye level. It is a chilling video, and the worldwide response by both young riders and their families showed that at least some of them got the point.

That story shows that bad surprises can be a test, a teachable moment, if those who experience or witness it are willing to learn. None of us like tests, especially if we are not ready for it. For those of you long out of school, do you remember pop quizzes? Did you like them? To this day pop quizzes are still an extremely controversial subject in the teaching profession. Scientific studies have shown that students who employ a mediator –

that is a clue or mnemonic device to link words or ideas – learn three times more material than those who simply study, and pop quizzes help students create mediators. "Men Very Easily Make Jugs Serve Useful Needs, Perhaps" As an isolated sentence, those words make no particular sense, but use them as an acronym for the planets of our solar system, and suddenly an important scientific fact becomes unforgettable – Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune and Pluto. (do it...) Excellent – you pass the test.

In the time of First Peter, which was written between 30 or 40 years after the crucifixion of Jesus, the early Christian church was also facing a test, and for many of those who had committed their lives to Christ, the test was a very unwelcome surprise. Think about the things that Jesus said and taught – even to this day, it is hard for us to understand why people would take such offense to such a singularly wise and loving life, and the teachings that followed. But the early Christians learned very quickly that many in their communities did take offense to their beliefs, and responded by giving them a very hard time.

Most of this offense in the Roman Empire of the first century resulted from a complete misunderstanding of Christian beliefs. By the time of First Peter, there were rumors that Christians were cannibals. Why? Because they ate a body and drank blood in their sacramental practices. Christians were also rumored to be incestuous. Why? Because they loved their brothers and their sisters. Christians were also known as atheists. Why? Because they refused to worship the Emperor or any other pagan gods. Hearing about our beliefs in that context helps us to understand why many Christians were completely isolated in their communities: they could not work; they could not socialize; they could not educate their children nor participate in the common life of their communities. The

Christians were shunned, ostracized, and disinherited or disowned by their own families, like the Apostle Paul.

First Peter is a deeply personal response to the suffering of the Christian community, and an attempt to provide a context by which their suffering can be understood and endured: “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice in so far as you are sharing Christ’s sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed.”

To this day there are many that believe becoming a follower of Christ will fix their problems and make their lives easier. Deceivers and profiteers in the Christian tradition have always taken advantage of those beliefs, promising a discipleship without cost or struggle. Perhaps those Christians whom First Peter is addressing felt the same way – how can so much joy among fellow Christians result in so much hate among the world? Why is being a Christian so hard? First Peter’s answer is to move beyond the physical struggle itself and focus on the spiritual meaning of the struggle, which can be best paraphrased as, “This is only a test.”

Just like an acronym is used to help students learn a basic truth, First Peter uses the life of Christ as a mediator to help believers understand their suffering. The Son of God also suffered as he obeyed the will of his Heavenly Father. Jesus was isolated from his family, his community, his heritage, and at the end, he was isolated from his apostles. Jesus was betrayed and denied by his followers, handed over by his religion, and crucified by the empire; yet he triumphed over death itself, and promised eternal life for those who believed in him. Unlike the rest of the world, which endures senseless suffering and meaningless

death, suffering and struggle creates an identity for Christians, as we are united with Christ and his life of absolute meaning.

First Peter then moves from the meaning of Christian suffering to its purpose: “If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you.” A life of the Spirit means that God uses us for a divine purpose, a purpose which takes up both our joys and our sorrows, our successes and our failures, our strengths and our weaknesses. C.S. Lewis summarized the purpose-filled life of the Holy Spirit in his one of his letters: ““Remember He is the artist and you are only the picture. You can't see it. So quietly submit to be painted---i.e., keep fulfilling all the obvious duties of your station (you really know quite well enough what they are!), asking forgiveness for each failure and then leaving it alone. You are in the right way. Walk--- don't keep on looking at it.”

Lewis makes it clear that, for the Christian, suffering is not a result of sin, because through Christ our sins are forgiven. This means that whatever we face, it is always to the glory of God, and nothing else. We may not see the purpose or understand it, but we can be confident that it is just a test – a means of strengthening our faith even as we continue to be conduits for God’s presence in this world. Hope is a powerful witness in a hopeless world. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote, “Only in darkness can we see the stars,” and no one would challenge the truth that his suffering changed the world. You and I may not be called to change the world, but all Christians are called to change a part of it – whichever part God gives to us to change.

Life is filled with surprises, both good and bad, but in Christ no test in our lives is random; no unexpected experience is meaningless. For many, suffering feel likes the end of

the world, but we who believe in Christ know what the end of the world will look like, and it looks nothing like failure, despair, or hopelessness; instead, the trials of our lives are only a test – and all we need to pass it, is to keep believing, and to embrace the Holy Spirit’s help in doing so.