

When Life Stinks

I'm usually adventurous when it comes to foreign food. But I was leery when I learned about a tropical fruit called durian during a trip to Indonesia. Three things made me highly suspicious of this strange delicacy, which is sold in large quantities on the streets of Jakarta.

First of all, durian looks absolutely deadly. Each of the large, round fruits is covered with massive thorns that stick out 4 inches or more. I'm sure if you threw one of these things at somebody from a second-story window the victim would die instantly.

Second, when you cut open the tough skin of a durian (Indonesian vendors will do this for you with a machete) you discover a hideous-looking gray pulp that has the consistency of thick pudding.

Third, the odor of durian reminds me of garbage, dirty dishwater and spoiled cantaloupe. It's gross—and the scent is so nauseating that hotels in Indonesia don't allow the popular fruit on their premises.

Since I am a culinary risk-taker, I decided to try durian when some guys from Apostolic Generation Church in Jakarta took me to a wooden stall on the street. There a young man sold us a durian and sliced it open. We sat at a crude sidewalk table and I braced myself for the worst. I held my nose and then put a clump of the gray fruit in my mouth.

I expected to gag, but that wasn't my reaction. I couldn't believe my taste buds! What looked ugly and smelled revolting turned out to be both sweet and pungent. I became a durian convert. On my last visit to Jakarta I even tried durian ice cream.

I also discovered an important lesson. God made durian, I

believe, to teach us that there's always something surprisingly sweet hidden in the difficult trials we face.

Life throws thorny durians at us all the time. Usually we try to avoid them. But the Bible tells us how to respond. Peter wrote: "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing ... but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing" (1 Pet. 4:12-13, NASB).

The apostle Paul took the same posture. His letter to the Philippians is called "the epistle of joy" because the words "joy" or "rejoice" appear in it more than 16 times. It is in this letter that Paul wrote: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice!" (4:4). Yet he penned this epistle while he was chained inside a Roman prison.

Like the durian fruit, Paul's jail cell looked and smelled horrible. Scholars say the dungeon probably reeked of human waste and death itself, since prisoners often died from starvation or disease. Yet amid that dank, mildew-stained cell Paul found something sweet. The sustaining presence of Christ gave him words that comfort us 2,000 years later.

Dutch evangelist Corrie ten Boom spent many months in a German concentration camp in the 1940s. She experienced unimaginable suffering in the lice-infested barracks of Ravensbrook. Yet Corrie learned to praise God—and in that hell on earth she found her life's message: "There is no pit so deep that God is not deeper still."

Your situation may look thorny and menacing—maybe even deadly—or it may just stink! But you must realize that God sends trials to mold our character, crush our pride and break our hard, outward shell so the Holy Spirit can flow through us to touch others.

If you're in a tough place these days (most people are), learn the secret of durian. Don't run from your trials, and don't

whine, gripe and whimper about them like a spiritual adolescent. This is your chance to grow up. Praise God even when everything in your flesh wants to quit. Be patient. You'll eventually find a sweet surprise inside your trial. When you rejoice in adversity, the bitterness of life is replaced by the fragrance of Christ. There is pain in this process, but you'll savor the final result.

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