

“Living With Hardships”

a sermon by

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**Text: “Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated.”
(II Corinthians 12:7b)**

One of the most remarkable figures in Nineteenth Century England was a man named William Wilberforce, a British politician, philanthropist, and the leader of the movement to abolish the slave trade in England. This past year a movie, “Amazing Grace,” was produced to commemorate his life.

William Wilberforce devoted a great deal of his life to work to abolish the slave trade in England. He died just three days after Parliament had adopted the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833, which abolished slavery in most of the British Empire.

William Wilberforce was a diminutive man who spent most of his life in poor health. As a young boy, he suffered from a serious of diseases that left him in such terrible physical shape that in later years he was forced to take opium on a regular basis simply to carry on. But in spite of the many physical handicaps from which he suffered, Wilberforce created quite a presence in the British Parliament. Once when James Boswell went to hear Wilberforce speak, he said afterwards, “I saw what seemed a mere shrimp mount upon the table; but as I listened, he grew and grew, until the shrimp became a whale.”

More than any other Englishman, Wilberforce stopped the terrible slave trade, and as one stands beside the grave of “The Attorney General of the unprotected and of the friendless” one has the great feeling that this man who had suffered so much himself had a great compassion for all of the downtrodden in life who suffer in so many ways.

I.

One of the most remarkable passages in Paul’s entire letter is found in the twelfth chapter of II Corinthians. In this passage he answers his critics in Corinth who question the authenticity of his call and his apostleship. In chapter 11 he points to his credentials. He speaks of what he has suffered on behalf of the Christian gospel: the beatings, the stoning, the shipwrecks, and the dangers from rivers, bandits, and all the other hardships he had suffered (II Corinthians 11: 22ff).

In Chapter 12, Paul relates another experience. He was caught up in a revelation in which he was taken to Paradise, hearing things that none had heard, seeing things that none other had seen. It must have been a kind of spiritual experience that few, if any, had ever experienced. But then Paul continues his argument in a different fashion. He goes on to say that in order to keep him from being too elated he received what he called a “thorn in the flesh” – a messenger of Satan.

No one knows for sure what this “thorn in the flesh” was for Paul. Many commentators on the New Testament have conjectured on this. Was it poor eyesight? Malaria? Epilepsy? Was it some character defect or even some form of mental illness?

Whatever it was, we know that it was an unwelcome guest for Paul. It was a hindrance to his ministry. Three times, he says, he prayed that God would remove this hindrance and three times he received the same answer from God: “My grace is sufficient for you.”

So often in the church we hear people complain about theological issues, ecclesiastic issues, and liturgical issues. But there is nothing that cuts to the question of our faith more than having to wrestle with a thorn in the flesh. I think of those individuals who wrestle with some physical disability that hinders them in every way. I think of those individuals who struggle with addictions that are so powerful. I think of individuals who have lost jobs, seen careers go up in smoke and who worry about the future. I think of marriages where joy has been replaced by bitterness, anger, and resentment. I think of parents who have had to struggle with a child, or households in our community where children cannot count on the support of their parents.

There is something gallant about a person who, in following Jesus, chooses to take up a cross. That is a courageous voluntary act of discipleship. But a “thorn in the flesh” – that is something very different. It is not something that we choose, but something that is thrust upon us.

Paul finally came to grips with this “thorn in the flesh.” He found in it something that had eluded him. “For when I am weak,” he says, “I am strong.” So how does a person find that grace that is sufficient for all our needs?

II.

In the first place, there is something about hardships that produce character in ways that might never have been possible apart from the experience of adversity. In his letter to the Church at Rome, Paul writes that “suffering produces endurance, and that endurance produces character, and that character produces hope which does not disappoint us.” (Romans 5:1-5)

This past week David Brooks wrote in the *New York Times* a tribute to our new President, Barack Obama. Brooks pointed out that one of attractive features of the President is the strength of his family. Brooks notes that this is even more remarkable given the fact that the President himself came from a broken home. His father abandoned his mother and him when he was a boy. Yet, Barack Obama has built a successful family with his wife Michelle and his two young daughters.

Some of the greatest stories in Scripture are the stories of people who have been tested in ways that seem unimaginable. Joseph, as a boy betrayed by his brothers, sent to Egypt, put in prison, then became the Pharaoh's most trusted adviser, was able to face the same brothers who betrayed him and said, "You meant it to me as evil, but God meant it to me as good."

One thinks of Abraham Lincoln. As a young man he tried business and failed, and spent many years paying off the debts of a worthless partner. He fell passionately in love with a young woman only to lose her to death. He was elected to Congress in 1846, but was defeated when he sought reelection. He tried to get an appointment to the United States Land Office but failed. Then he ran for the United States Senate and was defeated. In 1856 he was a candidate for the vice presidential nomination, but was beaten again. When at last he was elected President in 1860 he found himself facing a Civil War which he would have given his life to prevent. And yet, as I viewed the Lincoln Memorial this past week during the Inaugural ceremonies, I could not help but be reminded that as much as we might deplore the terrible hardships and troubles that Lincoln suffered, we know that the quality of character that he exhibited did not come from ease, comfort, and pleasantness alone. He did not simply endure his tragedies; he built character out of them.

We may not like that kind of world but it is the kind of world in which we live. To be sure, Paul did not want that "thorn in the flesh" any more than any of us do. But in that struggle he found something he might have otherwise missed – the power of God's grace that was sufficient for all his needs.

III.

Then too, hardships have a way of strengthening our faith and reminding us of our dependence on God. Recall, if you will, the Bible's metaphors for trouble. It is a "refiner's fire" – it can separate the gold in us from the alloy. It is "tribulation" – that is a threshing – it can separate the grain in us from the chaff. It is a "chastening" – it can discipline, correct, and purify us. Now please don't misunderstand me. I am not singing a hymn of praise to trouble. We all dread it, but sooner or later it comes to all of us.

Paul says that he prayed three times to God to remove this terrible "thorn in the flesh," but each time the answer came back – the thorn would not be removed – but God's grace was sufficient for Paul.

If our vocabulary did not have words in it like "trouble," "adversity," "tragedy," and "grief," we would never know the meaning of words like "courage," "bravery," "patience" or "self-sacrifice." The person who knows no hardship will know no strength. The one who embraces no challenge will need no courage.

Now do not misunderstand me. I am not saying that trouble alone brings out the best in us. I am saying that if we have anything resembling the spirit of Christ, we can make trouble bring out the best in us.

Trouble by itself is neutral. It can do almost anything to a person. It can make a person bitter and resentful. It can make a person mean and cruel. It can plunge a person into great despair and wreck his faith totally.

But it can do something else as well. It can do what it did to the Apostle Paul. It brought him to the realization that by God's grace there was real strength in his weakness.

IV.

Then too, hardships have another value in our lives. They can deepen our sympathies to other people and intensify our usefulness.

This Friday I watched with interest the ABC Evening News as a Charlotte native, Reggie Love, was named the "Person of the Week." Reggie Love graduated from Providence Day school in Charlotte and attended Duke University where he played football and basketball. I came to know Reggie through my daughter Lucy, who was a friend and classmate of Reggie. After college he drifted for a while, unsure of what he wanted to do. He tried out for football in the NFL but was unsuccessful. He tried a couple of other job attempts, but to no avail. Finally, he placed an application to work for a newly elected, unknown Senator from Illinois named Barack Obama. Much to his surprise, he was hired for a menial office job.

Later, as Senator Obama campaigned for President, Reggie became what is called a "body man." This was a new position to me. The "body man" is not a security person. He is the person who is with the candidate day and night to provide whatever the candidate needs. He holds his jacket, makes sure he has food to eat, carries pens, notebooks and briefcases. During the course of the campaign Reggie Love and Barack Obama formed a friendship – not just on the basketball court, but in their everyday relationship. For Reggie Love, it was a life-changing event that gave him a new sense of direction and purpose.

I don't think any of us can fully appreciate the opportunity we have to influence other people. Today, we know we are living in challenging times. People are losing jobs, the economy is in a deep recession and none of us are sure what the future is going to bring.

One thing is sure. Most of us are going to be tested in ways we have not heretofore imagined. And yet, each of us will have an opportunity to take whatever hardship comes our way and to release within ourselves those hidden streams which washes the bitterness out of our lives and move us to a deep serenity.

Three times the Apostle Paul prayed that this "thorn in the flesh" would be removed, and three times he received the word that God's grace was sufficient for all his needs.

That is the good news we proclaim, and that is the good news that allows us to triumph in our troubles.

Amen.