

“When Suffering Comes”
II Corinthians 12:7-10
By Pastor Art Scanson

There is a calendar titled *The 365 Stupidest Things Ever Said*. And so, each day has a story. Here is one of them, listen closely: “If you bought our course, ‘How To Fly In Six Easy Lessons,’ we apologize for any inconvenience caused by our failure to include the last chapter, ‘How To Land Your Plane Safely.’ Send us your name and address and we will send you the last chapter posthaste. Request by estates will be honored.” Now, if you are a pilot, I hope you didn’t purchase that course. Crazy things happen in this world, don’t they?

Then there is this one. It’s about a pastor who was taking a morning walk. He came across a woman pushing a baby carriage up a hill. She was struggling with it a bit, so he offered to push it for her. It was a rather unwieldy baby carriage, so it was no easy job to get it to the top. Once they had reached her house, the woman thanked the pastor for his help. The pastor replied, “Do you mind if I take a little peak at the precious baby that I’ve been pushing all this time?”

The woman laughed and said, “Pastor, this ain’t a baby we been struggling with. It’s my husband’s weekly beer supply.”

Yes, life happens. I guess it is better to laugh than cry.

Actress Mary Tyler Moore sums it up well. You may remember her at one time, America’s sweetheart. For most of us we probably see her life as a charmed life. It wasn’t. She married as a teenager and then divorced. Her sister in college overdosed and died. Mary got married a second time and divorced. Then her son accidentally shot and killed himself. In her despair she turned to booze and became an alcoholic, got off it, but contracted diabetes as a result of her drinking. Diabetes affected her eyes so there is a good chance she will be blind by the end of her life. Yes, America’s sweetheart, but not without deep, deep heartaches. Mary summed up her experiences like this: ‘none of us gets out of here without pain.’ (Tommy Nelson, *The 12 Essentials of Godly Success* [Nashville, TN; Broadman & Holman Pub. 2005])

Saint Paul, probably the second most influential person who ever lived. He, more than anyone else except Jesus, has fashioned the Christian faith. He if anyone deserved to live a charmed life. But no that was not to be. Listen to him from our Scripture Lesson for today: Read II Corinthians 12:7b-10.

Paul speaks of an interesting expression - a “thorn in the flesh.”

If we turn to the Greek word here for thorn, at least one source would say it is a stake. Not a tiny thorn as on a rose bush, but a shaft of wood sharpened at one end. Paul felt that he was stabbed by a sharpened wooden stake, by a messenger of Satan, he says, “to torment me, keep me from being too elated.”

The scriptures really don’t tell us what the nature of the thorn is, but it got his attention. Whatever it was, Paul knew what Mary Tyler Moore was saying was true: “none of us gets out of here without pain.” Paul knew better than most of us that life does not always go the way we plan. But he also knew that pain is not God’s last word on the human condition. He would remind us that there is hope for the sufferer and victory for the anguished heart. That with God’s help we can deal with any thorn, any obstacle, any heartache or suffering.

So, we need to be reminded, pain and suffering and loss can bring us closer to God.

Scott Wesley Brown is a well-known singer of contemporary Christian music. He tells of

a time years ago when he was doing concerts in churches behind the iron curtain. One night he sang in a small church full of impoverished believers, who were obviously suffering for their faith. In the Soviet Union of those days Christians were denied jobs. They lived on incomes below the poverty level. . .paying a high price in suffering for their faith. Brown reports that even the concrete floor of the poor little church was worn out. After he sang a little woman came up to him and thanked him for his sharing and then, after finding out he was from the United States, she said, “It must be hard to be a Christian there.” Then she walked away.

Brown didn’t understand what she meant. How could this woman living in an atheistic nation who suffered every day for her faith comment that it would be hard to be a believer in the U.S.–the land of religious freedom–where things were so easy for Christians? On the way home from the concert he told his interpreter what had happened and asked what the woman had meant. The interpreter said, “She knows that in the United States you are blessed with wealth. You have fast food restaurants, stylish clothing, luxury cars and homes. . .so many things. But here all these people have is their faith in Jesus. She knows that it is harder for people who have it easy to put their faith in God. They put their faith instead in things. This is why she felt it must be hard to be a Christian in the US.” (Mark Adams, <http://www.heritagechurchva.org/sermons/sermon19991114.php>.)

How true he was and is. Even today as the Christian movement stalls in the US and rapidly fades in Europe - and to think of how it is growing in Korea and Africa where Christians are either persecuted or very poor. Is it possible that our very prosperity may be our greatest obstacle spiritually? Will it take pain and suffering and loss to bring us closer to God?

Let us be clear – **this is not to say God sends pain and suffering.** We need to understand this. If you are going through a difficult time right now, it is not because God is punishing you for some reason. Neither is God trying to send you a message. However, God does use our pain and suffering to help us become stronger or to make us a blessing to someone else. This is where Paul is coming from when he writes: “*I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*” How can this be? How can these “thorns of the flesh” be turned into blessings?

One way is they can give us empathy for others. Some time back there was a movie -*Regarding Henry*, in which Harrison Ford portrayed Henry Turner. Based on the life of Henry Turner, a successful Manhattan-based attorney who seems to have everything—a perfect wife, a perfect daughter, a perfect life. It turns out that this is just a facade. Instead, Henry is a despicable and ruthless trial lawyer, unfaithful to his wife and seemingly without regard for the well-being of anyone.

Then one night he goes out to get a pack of cigarettes and he ends up in the middle of a robbery that goes bad and he is shot in the head and chest. He ends up with significant brain damage, such that he cannot move or talk or remember anything. Months and months of rehabilitation and to relearn everything—to speak, walk, and nearly all functions. In this process Henry now learns to love his family and friends as well as to find true happiness in life. To the utter surprise of his wife and daughter, Henry is a very loving and affectionate man. Henry Turner would probably never have become an authentic human being without this experience. I tell you this to make the contrast between what he was and what he became. And to note that there are many self-absorbed people in our society who are that way partially because life has been too easy for them. It is hard for them to relate to those who have less than them. They don’t have a clue, nor do they seem to care about the pain of others around them, because they

have never experienced much pain themselves.

Paul writes to remind us, “To keep me from becoming conceited. . .there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.”

One more thing we need to notice. Thorns can give us a special sensitivity to God. It is often the same pain that drives some people away from God, that draws other people closer to God. Those who are drawn closer are the ones who understand that God shares their suffering. God is there with them in their suffering.

Retired seminary professor Fred Craddock tells a memorable story about a pastor he met who had no arms. This pastor described to Craddock how difficult it was as a child to put on his own clothes without arms. He said his mother always dressed him, and he’d gotten to be a pretty big boy. She fed him, she dressed him. But one day she put his clothes in the middle of the floor and said to her armless child, “Dress yourself.”

The boy said, “I can’t dress myself, I don’t have . . .”

She said, “You’ll have to dress yourself,” and she left the room.

He said, “I kicked, screamed, kicked, screamed, yelled, ‘You don’t love me anymore!’ Finally, he realized that if he were to get any clothes on, he’d have to do it himself. After hours of struggle, he got some clothes on. He said, “It was not until later that I knew my mother was in the next room crying.” *(Craddock Stories*[St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press,)2001].

My friends, God does not cause our suffering, God shares our suffering. Yes, Mary Tyler Moore was right, “none of us gets out of here without pain.” But out of pain can come opportunities for us to grow and experience God’s grace and love for us and to help us to see and have empathy with others. Yes, pain and suffering may hurt for a time but with God’s presence in our lives, it will turn to lessons well learned and blessings for our life.