

OVERCOMING HANDICAPPED LIVES
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2 CORINTHIANS 12:1-5

The subject of Handicapped Lives is one which takes us all in! There is maybe one young, Superman here who has never been aware of limitation, but I suspect not!
And by the way, even Superman had his kryptonite!

I have never known a person intimately whom did not turn out to be dealing with a handicap.

Life is filled with unsung heroes who have jumped the hurdles and finished the race victoriously.

That's why I admire so much the great scientist Louis Pasteur upon whose titanic work modern medicine rests. We are certain that he must have had a robust health to work with! Yet, we discover that he had a paralytic stroke at 46 and was handicapped for life.
We find Beethoven writing music though deaf and Milton writing poetry although blind and olympic gold metal winner track star ----- Joyner overcoming polio to win the gold.
And we begin to discover that in general, the great work of the world has been done by handicapped people.

How do they do it? What was the inward technique with which they handled limitations? Is there any one of us who does not need to learn that?

IN 2 CORINTHIANS 12:1-10 PAUL DEMONSTRATES HOW HE OVERCAME HIS THORN IN THE FLESH.

READ 2 CORINTHIANS 12:1-5.

Describes vision he had fourteen years ago (Not conversion - this was over twenty years after conversion.)
Paul probably had many visions not recorded.
Probably a spiritual highlight of Paul's life - can't remember if entire body was taken or just his soul was transported to the third heaven.

But notice, in the moment of Paul's greatest exaltation came also his greatest humiliation.

Read 2 Corinthians 12:7.

"Thorn" same word as "stake" (Not steak as in eat) From Babylonians - sharpen trees and impale people on stake. Paul had stake twisting in his body to keep him humble.

What was that thorn? No one really knows!

If Paul had been like some of us someone would know! Think of writing all those letters and telling no one the symptoms of his trouble.

Four Main Guesses:

1. UGLY - 2 Corinthians 10:10 - "Letters weighty but bodily appearance is weak. "Beaten with rods.
2. MALARIA - very prevalent and incapacitating in Asia Minor.
3. EPILEPSY: Read Galatians 4:13-14. Ancient world believed epilepsy caused by demons. Spit to ward off demons. In Galatians 4:14, "scorn" = "to spit at" (read with "spit at")
4. EYE TROUBLE - Most probable - blind at conversion, scales - Galatians 6:11 - "Large letters with my own hand"

Galatians 4:15 - "Pluck out eyes"

Acts 23 - trials, chided high priest, slapped "Didn't you know you were speaking to high priest? "No didn't perceive that."

Reason for not telling nature of thorn!??

So all of us could IDENTIFY WITH IT.

We know nothing about Paul's trouble except that behind the scenes - just like the rest of us - Paul had to handle a limitation that he prayed to escape, that he could not evade, that he had to somehow or the other settle down and live with.

Read 2 Corinthians 12:8-10.

"Lord, take it away." God didn't give him what he asked for. Notice, even though he didn't give him his answer; God did answer his need: God's grace was sufficient for every situation.

IT IS A CRUCIAL HOUR IN ONE'S LIFE WHEN HE STANDS OPEN-EYED BEFORE HIS HANDICAP.

Paul had a thorn in life! Jesus Christ had a cross.

Every garden has its weeds; stickers belong to every rose; every life has its strife.

Here is a young boy who is crippled in early infancy - he's grown up thru his first years with no idea of what has happened to him - but sometime in childhood it will dawn on him that he is not like other children. And his whole life will depend upon the way that he handles it.

Here is a woman who in her youth had all the natural ambitions for success but who now recognizes that she'll never write poetry or compose music or hold the business positions about which she dreamed.

Here is one who has expectations of a normal, well-adjusted, happy life, but like a beast from ambush, an accident, or sickness leaped and now he must work with crippled machinery.

How many of us have stepped on the gas but we have to admit again and again that the power just isn't in us. God didn't equip us with 8 cylinders or with 6--only four--and those none too good.

Maybe yours is a life that wanted love and missed it.

Maybe yours is a home where marriage might have been a thing of beauty but was a tragedy instead.

Maybe yours is a family where a child who was created as a blessing became an inward agony.

Maybe yours is a household where death has severed the tie that was the support of the home.

Alexander Maclaren: "Be kind to everyone you meet because everyone you meet is fighting a battle!"

See broken arm and know it will be healed in a few weeks. How difficult it is to see a broken heart. Know just the right words to say to some of us.

How then can we deal with our handicaps? How do we harness the grace that is sufficient for us?

OBSERVE FIVE PRACTICAL LESSONS ABOUT OVERCOMING LIFE'S HANDICAPS.

1. TRUST THAT HANDICAPS ARE NO ACCIDENT. GOD'S PLAN IS IN PLACE.

2 CORINTHIANS 12:7: "To keep me from becoming conceited."

God had very definite intentions for Paul. So He allowed this thorn.

God has very definite plans for us: Psalm 139:16: "All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be."

God has placed a hedge around us and Satan can do nothing lest God allow it.

Job 1:9-10 Satan says to God, "Does Job fear God for nothing? Have you not put a hedge around him and his household and everything he has?"

For Christians, two kinds of afflictions in Bible.

1. CORRECTING - out of God's will, resist spirit, feel hand of God. God spans for same reason you spank your child. Hebrews 12:5-11

2. PERFECTING - I Peter - suffering produces perfection READ 1 PETER 1:6-7.

Spurgeon - great preacher - read (sermon a day for ten years. Preached five times a week and three or four times on Sunday. Gout - "why me?" - two or three months of every year had to go to Mentome, France - left church, etc. Thorn? Yes, but read and studied to produce finest sermons world has known.

2. SAY "WHAT AN OPPORTUNITY!" INSTEAD OF "WHAT IF?".

2 CORINTHIANS 2:10: "That is why I delight in weaknesses, insults, hardships, and persecutions.

First instinctive reaction toward a handicap is a negative rebellion or self-pity.

How often we stroke our wounded spirits and cry "If I had not this handicap, what a person I would have been." We dream of what we could have been and what a glorious a paradise we could have had if only we had not this handicap.

We must realize that very few of us are able to live life thru with no limitations or handicaps. Whoever had the chance to live out a life under the ideal conditions that they would have chosen?

Once when Ole' Bull, the great violinist, was giving a concert in Paris, his A string snapped and he transposed the composition and finished it on 3 strings! Now that's life - to have your A string snap and to have to finish on 3 strings!

How many of us have had to test that out? It seems that so much of the thrilling part of life lies in the ability to victoriously handle handicaps that, as much as I should have liked to hear Ole Bull with all the resources of a perfect instrument at his command, if I could have heard him only once, I should have liked to hear him when the A string snapped and, without self-pity or surrender, he finished on 3 strings.

I'm certain that Paul would rather not have had his thorn in the flesh. But I suspect that there are qualities of understanding and sympathy in Paul and a moving music in some of the great passages of his epistles that never would have been there if he had not had to finish on 3 strings.

3. STOP WINDOW SHOPPING AND LIVE WITH YOUR OWN INVENTORY.

2 CORINTHIANS 10:12: "We do not compare ourselves When they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, then are not wise."

The reason so many of us fret at our limitations is that we keep comparing ourselves with others and wishing to be what they are or do what they do.

You see what we do: Born to be berry bushes and produce good berries, we lift anxious, envious eyes to apples trees with larger size fruit, OR, born to be apples trees and produce good apples, we look with worried jealousy at maple trees with their greater shade, OR, born to be maple trees, we are anxious because elm trees are taller and more graceful.

God has given all of us a special field to till. Accept it. If the soil is thinner and the rocks more numerous and

the prospects less promising than another's field. That is simply life's problem which we all must face. We must stop looking over the fence and day dreaming about what we could do with some one else's field.

In James Dobson's first "Focus on the Family" film series he shared a story about a five year old African-American boy who was dying of lung cancer. Lung cancer is a terrifying disease in its final stages. The lungs fill with fluid and the patient is unable to breathe.

A nurse named Gracie Schaeffer took care of this boy in the latter days of his life.

The little boy had a Christian mother who loved him and stayed by his side through the long ordeal. She cradled him on her lap and talked softly about the Lord. Instinctively, the woman was preparing her son for the final hours to come. Gracie told Dobson that she entered his room one day as death approached, and she heard this lad talking about hearing bells.

"The bells are ringing, Mommie," he said. "I can hear them."

Gracie thought he was hallucinating because he was already slipping away. She left and returned a few minutes later and again hear him talking about hearing bells ringing.

The nurse said to his mother, "I'm sure you know your baby is hearing things that aren't there. He is hallucinating because of the sickness."

The mother pulled her son closer to her chest, smiled and said, "No, Miss Schaeffer. He is not hallucinating. I told him when he was frightened--when he couldn't breathe--if he would listen carefully, he could hear the bells of heaven ringing for him. That is what he's been talking about all day."

That precious child died on his mother's lap later that evening, and he was still talking about the bells of heaven when the angels came to take him.

Stop window shopping to compare your situation with some one else. Live with what you have. And in Christ, that is a lot.

4. RECOGNIZE THAT THORNS SET THE STAGE FOR SPIRITUAL SERVICE.

2 CORINTHIANS 12:10: "For when I am weak, then I am strong."

We live in an age of excuses - My headache, my arthritis, my dysfunctional family background, my alcoholic wife, my (you fill in the blank).

If Paul hadn't had that thorn, he'd never have been Paul.

You bring on some shining specimen of manhood who's never had a handicap, who has an integrated personality, fortunate circumstances, and great physical health, and however energetic may be his active service there are simply some things that he can't do for others that Helen Keller can!

Many of us will never appreciate the beauty or argument of "Paradise Lost" or "Paradise Regained" but one thing we all do appreciate is blind Milton setting down to write them. That does something to us.

Many of us are not impressed with Longfellow's Translation of Dante. But when we learn that Mrs. Longfellow accidentally set her dress on fire, that Longfellow desperately but vainly tried to quench the flames, and that, after it was all over and Mrs. Longfellow had died, he sat down in his wifeless, motherless home to translate Dante to occupy his mind, and, what's more, did it beautifully. That does something to us.

Many of us really don't care whether or not John Bunyan went to jail for preaching in England or not, but one thing we have to admit, the immortal allegory of the Christian life, Pilgrims Progress would never have been written had it not been for that prison.

5. FIND STRENGTH IN GOD'S GRACE WHICH IS ENERGY ENOUGH WHEN THINGS GET TOUGH.

2 CORINTHIANS 12:9a and 10b: "My strength is sufficient; when I am weak, then I am strong."

"God, heal me," cried Paul.

"No son, you need that thorn. I won't remove it, but I will give you grace to bear it."

Notice, "my grace is sufficient for thee."

Is there really enough grace to meet my needs?

Compare beginning and ending: God's grace ... for me.

Like fish in Mississippi River," mustn't drink too much or I'll drain the river.

Like ocean to boy on beach, "My depths are sufficient to fill your bucket."

Christ says, "My grace is sufficient for thee."

While Christ's grace is sufficient and inexhaustible, he never dispenses it superfluously or needlessly. God gives us the grace we need for any particular situation.

Spurgeon was asked: "Grace enough to burn at stake at town square tomorrow?" "Don't need it today, but by 12:00 tomorrow I'd have the grace and be ready."

God doesn't give martyr's grace to office worker. But let the office worker become a martyr and He will pour out martyr's grace.

Several years ago the producer for a television docudrama obtained permission from a cancer specialist to place cameras in his clinic.

Then, with approval from three patients, he captured on film the moment each of them learned they were afflicted with a malignancy in its later stages. Their initial shock, disbelief, fear and anger were recorded in graphic detail.

Afterward, the documentary team followed these three families through the treatment process with its ups and downs, hopes and disappointments, pain and terror. The drama of life and death unfolded on the screen. Eventually, all three patients died.

What stood out were the different ways these people dealt with their frightening circumstances. The two who apparently had no faith reacted with anger and bitterness. They not only fought their disease, but seemed to be at war with everyone else. Their personal relationships, and even their marriages, were shaken--especially as the end drew near.

That's what made the third individual so inspiring.

He was a humble, black pastor of a small inner-city Baptist church. He was in his late 60s and had been a minister throughout his adult life. His love for the Lord was so profound that it was reflected in everything he said.

When he and his wife were told he had only a few months to live, they revealed no panic. They quietly asked the doctor what it all meant. When he had explained the treatment program and what they could anticipate, they politely thanked him for his concern and departed. The cameras followed this little couple to their old car and eavesdropped as they bowed their heads and recommitted themselves to the Lord.

In the months that followed, the pastor never lost his poise. Nor was he glib about his illness. He was not in denial. He simply had come to terms with the cancer and its probable outcome. He knew the Lord was in control, and he refused to be shaken in his faith.

The cameras were present on his final Sunday in his church. He preached the sermon that morning and talked openly about his impending death. To the best of my recollection, this is what he said:

"Some of you have asked me if I'm mad at God for this disease that has taken over my body. I'll tell you honestly that I have nothing but love in my heart for my Lord. He didn't do this to me. We live in a sinful world where sickness and death are the curse man has brought upon himself. And I'm going to a better place where there will be no more tears, no suffering and no heartache. So don't feel bad for me.

"Besides," he continued, "our Lord suffered and died for our sins. Why should I not share in His suffering?"

Then he began to sing, without accompaniment, in an old broken voice:

Must Jesus bear the cross alone,

And all the world go free?

No, there's a cross for everyone,

And there's a cross for me.

How happy are the saints above,
Who once went sorr'wing here;
But now they taste unmingled
love, And joy without a tear.
The consecrated cross I'll bear,
Till death shall set me free,
And then go home my crown to wear,
For there's a crown for me.

He slipped into eternity a few days later, where he met the Lord he had served for a lifetime.

Many of you have thorn today- God's word is: None of them are wasted:
Psalm 56:8: "Put all my tears in your bottle."

INVITATION

Remember Jesus Christ: He who sent Paul a thorn for his own good once wore a crown of thorns for the good and salvation of all sinners.

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Hiding Place

Jews - cold prison, gruel, ants, transferred to Vught. Night -- barracks for processing -
Bunkers - "Some don't appreciate the accommodations at bunkers."

"Betsie, how long will it take?" Betsie: "Perhaps years; but what a better way to spend
our lives!" Corrie - "What are you talking about?" Betsie: "These young women,
Corrie. If they can be taught to hate by the Nazis. Why they can be taught to love
through Jesus Christ! We can show them Jesus Christ as long as we're here!"

Corrie writes, "I looked at the matron seated at the desk in front of us. Saw a gray uniform
and a visored cap. Betsie saw a wounded human being who needed Christ. I wondered
what kind of road she followed, while I trudged along on the all too solid earth!"

In midst of all the thorns, Betsie knew that His grace was sufficient. Corrie learned it later.
Have you learned it yet?