

ADVERSITY AND FAITH

2 Corinthians 12:2-10

Some of the greatest men and women have been saddled with disabilities and adversity but have managed to overcome them.

Wednesday was the birthday of our nation, but can you imagine what might have happened if George Washington called off the fight because the Revolutionary Army was buried in snow at Valley Forge? Abraham Lincoln was raised in abject poverty, yet he managed to get an education become an attorney and eventually 16th president of the United States. Franklin Delano Roosevelt was paralyzed by polio in 1921. He went on to establish a treatment center in Warm Springs, Georgia for polio survivors, became Governor of New York and was elected President of the United States of America an unprecedented 4 times!

Composer Ludwig van Beethoven began losing his hearing in his twenties, and by the last decade of his life he was almost completely deaf. In 1811 he gave up conducting and performing in public but continued to compose. It is said that he had the legs cut off of his piano so that it rested on the floor. From this point on, he identified the notes and harmonies through the vibrations the piano made through the floor.

Itzhak Perlman, also a polio survivor overcame incredible odds to become a world renowned concert violinist and master violin teacher. Albert Einstein was labeled a slow learner and “retarded” and was considered to be uneducable. And finally, my hero, Helen Keller blinded and deafened at the age of 18 months, became an American author, political activist, and lecturer. She was the first deaf-blind person to earn a Bachelor of Arts degree.

Adversity is defined as unfavorable fortune or fate; a condition marked by misfortune, calamity or distress. Raise your hand if you have ever experienced adversity of any kind. It can be an illness, physical challenge - temporary or permanent, loss of job, financial difficulties, the unexpected death of a loved one...Or it can be something as simple as falling down as a child and scraping your knee. When adversity has paid an unwelcome visit in your life has some well-meaning person ever said to

you, “When life hands you lemons, make lemonade?” How about being told that your troubles are part of God’s plan for your life? And finally, have you ever been told that your life difficulties are due to some unconfessed sin in your life??

One particular memorable event when I was still a baby Christian was the time I was prayed over for my hearing to be healed. And when that did not happen, I was told I must have unconfessed sin in my life, and when I insisted on wearing my hearing aid was told that “if you had enough faith, you would not wear the hearing aid!” Many years later, when I was diagnosed with breast cancer three short weeks before seminary graduation, I was told by fellow students that, “this was God’s will for my life!” AND “This will make you a better minister!”

Sadly we have all been “victims” for lack of a better word of what I call “false theology.” I once participated in a Bible Study where an elderly woman proudly proclaimed, “God must really love me, because nothing bad has ever happened to me in my life!” I literally choked on that one!

To make matters worse, we are living at a time when the Prosperity Gospel is alive and well, and being preached in many churches. The Prosperity Gospel is a religious belief among some Christians, who hold that financial blessing and physical well-being are always the will of God for them, and that faith, positive speech, and donations to religious causes will increase one’s material wealth. Prosperity theology looks at the Bible as a contract between God and humans: if humans have faith in God, God will deliver security and prosperity. This kind of false teaching literally sets my teeth on edge. What does this teaching say to persons struggling with health? What about persons drowning in debt and poverty? What of those persons dealing with unspeakable tragedy like Horatio Spafford?

Horatio G. Spafford was a successful lawyer and businessman in Chicago with a lovely family - a wife, Anna, and five children. However, they were not strangers to tears and tragedy. Their young son died with pneumonia in 1871, and in that same year, much of their business was lost

in the great Chicago fire. Yet, when the business was rebuilt, it flourished once more.

On Nov. 21, 1873, an ocean liner was crossing the Atlantic from the U.S. to Europe. Among the passengers were Mrs. Spafford and their four daughters. Although Mr. Spafford had planned to go with his family, he found it necessary to stay in Chicago to help solve an unexpected business problem. He told his wife he would join her and their children in Europe a few days later. His plan was to take another ship.

About four days into the crossing of the Atlantic, the ship collided with a powerful, iron-hulled Scottish ship. Suddenly, all of those on board were in grave danger. Anna hurriedly brought her four children to the deck. She knelt there with Annie, Margaret Lee, Bessie and Tanetta and prayed that God would spare them if that could be His will, or to make them willing to endure whatever awaited them. Within approximately 12 minutes, the ill-fated ship slipped beneath the dark waters of the Atlantic, carrying with it 226 of the passengers including the four Spafford children.

A sailor, rowing a small boat over the spot where the ship went down, spotted a woman floating on a piece of the wreckage. It was Anna, still alive. They pulled her to safety and rowed her to shore. From there she wired her husband a message which began, "Saved alone, what shall I do?"

Mr. Spafford booked passage on the next available ship and left to join his grieving wife. With the ship about four days out, the captain called Spafford to his cabin and told him they were over the place where his children went down.

According to Bertha Spafford Vester, a daughter born after the tragedy, Spafford wrote "It Is Well with My Soul" while on this journey.

When peace like a river attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll,
Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say,
It is well, it is well with my soul.

Chorus:

It is well with my soul,
It is well, it is well with my soul

Would you have tried to comfort Mr. Spafford by suggesting it was God's will that his four daughters drowned?

In our text this morning from 2 Corinthians, Paul addresses this very theme of Adversity and Faith. In the first part of the reading from 2 Corinthians Paul briefly touches upon a vision he had had 2 years earlier of God's heavenly kingdom. He does not go into any details but instead uses this as a sort of springboard to talk about what he really wants the Corinthian people to know. Paul moves rather quickly from heavenly visions to life in the trenches. "to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh" (12:7) Paul did plea with God to remove this thorn not once, not twice, but three times and each time it remains. Paul understood his thorn as an agent sent by Satan to diminish his effectiveness of his mission, an agent that actually backfired on the enemy because it keeps Paul grounded in his faith giving the credit for his success to his faith in God. Paul comes to the conclusion that in spite of his weakness from his thorn, he is strong in his witness and ministry because he had to rely more and more on God for strength and guidance. Paul managed to discover God's grace in his weakness and limitations, and this is really the key point of this passage. God did not cause Paul's affliction any more than God causes a child to develop leukemia. But God is present even in the difficult things and the grace of God can be strongly evident even through the afflictions that bring God – and us – grief and sorrow.

How?? I can only tell you how I experienced God in the midst of my battle with breast cancer. I was fortunate in that I only needed radiation following my lumpectomy. For 37 ½ treatments the drill was always the same. Wearing a hospital gown, I would enter the cold, somber room where my treatments were administered. Once properly positioned on the metal table with the "cone" strategically pointed where it was needed. The technicians literally ran from the room. There I was, left arm over my head, ready to be zapped, and "it" happened. I knew without a doubt that I was not alone in that room. I had such an overwhelming sense of Emmanuel, God with me, so I made up what became my radiation prayer. Picturing a pac man eating all the cancer cells I would pray, God, let the

radiation destroy all the bad cells while you protect the good ones. My radiation therapy became some of the most sacred, holy moments with God in my entire life.

Each one of us here struggles with challenges in our lives – medical, emotional, physical in our body, mind and spirit. Each one of us has at some point in our life asked God to remove our affliction or the affliction of a dearly loved one, and God did not. In the midst of that journey, did you find God with you? Or, Did God abandon you or your loved one to walk that journey alone? I surely pray that was not the case. Paul's words this morning gives us insight into what it means to be in the grip of God's grace – a power and strength that is not our own. And surrendering to this grace so that even in our weakest moments we are able to be strong.

My closing story is a story of a man who had all the reason in the world not to be an ambassador for Christ, but he believed with his whole heart that God was calling him to do this work, therefore he went forth in obedience, trusting that God would lead him and make it possible for him to do the work.

A minister concluded that his church was getting into serious financial troubles. Coincidentally, while checking the church storeroom, he discovered several cartons of new bibles that had never been opened and distributed. So at his Sunday sermon, he asked for three volunteers from the congregation who would be willing to sell the bibles door-to-door for \$10 each to raise the desperately needed money for the church. Peter, Paul and Louie all raised their hands to volunteer for the task. The Reverend knew that Peter and Paul earned their living as salesmen and were likely capable of selling some bibles but he had serious doubts about Louie. Louie was just a little local farmer, who had always tended to keep to himself because he was embarrassed by his speech impediment. Poor Louis stuttered very badly. But, not wanting to discourage poor Louis, the Reverend decided to let him try anyway.

He sent the three of them away with the back seat of their cars stacked with bibles and asked them to meet with him and report the results of their door-to-door selling efforts the following Sunday which they did. Anxious to find out how successful they were, the Reverend immediately asked

Peter, "Well, Peter, how did you make out selling our bibles last week?" Proudly handing the Reverend an envelope, Peter replied, "Pastor, using my sales prowess, I was able to sell 20 bibles, and here's the 200 dollars I collected on behalf of the church."

"Fine job, Peter!" The Reverend said, vigorously shaking his hand. Turning to Paul, he asked "And Paul, how many bibles did you manage to sell for the church last week?" Paul, smiling and sticking out his chest, confidently replied, "Reverend, I am a professional salesman and was happy to give the church the benefit of my sales expertise. Last week I sold 28 bibles on behalf of the church, and here's 280 dollars I collected." The Reverend responded with congratulations and gratitude.

Apprehensively, the Reverend turned to Louie and said, "And Louie, did you manage to sell any bibles last week?" Louie silently offered the Reverend a large envelope. The Pastor opened it and counted the contents. "What is this?" the Reverend exclaimed. "Louie, this is \$3200 dollars! Are you saying that you sold 320 bibles for the church, door to door, in just one week? Louie just nodded. That's impossible!" both Peter and Paul said in unison. "We're professional salesmen, yet you claim to have sold 10 times as many bibles as we could." "Yes, this does seem unlikely," the Reverend agreed. "I think you'd better tell how you managed this, Louie."

Louie shrugged. "I-I-I- re-re-really do-do-don't kn-kn-know f-f-f-for sh-sh-sh-sure," he stammered.

Impatiently, Peter interrupted. "For crying out loud, Louie, just tell us what you said to them when they answered the door!"

"A-a-a-all I-I-I s-s-said wa-wa-was," Louis replied, "W-w-w-w-would y-y-y-you l-l-l-l-l-like t-t-to b-b-b-buy th-th-th-this b-b-b-b-bible f-f-for t-t-ten b-b-b-bucks ---o-o-o-or--- wo-wo-would yo-you j-j-j-just l-like m-m-me t-t-to st-st-stand h-h-here and r-r-r-r-r-read it t-to y-y-you?"

In the words of Paul, Therefore, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak then I am strong. And all of God's people said.