

July 24, 2022 - Sermon Manuscript - Hope in Trials

Well, as of Friday morning I was planning on preaching the rest of John chapter 9, but when I sat down to put my thoughts together, I felt led to set John aside for this week.

Many of us have been going through some really difficult times lately. Even now. Most of it is unspoken - I just happen to know about some of it because I'm the pastor. So, I felt like this morning we needed to talk about hope.

I imagine that many of us resonated with the words we've sung this morning. In the first song, the writer says, "my soul longs and even faints" for God. In other words, they're at their breaking point.

Later on in the song we sang, "My heart and flesh cry out for You, the living God." I think these words are meant to reflect words from the Psalms where the writer cries out to God in anguish. All they want at this point is to be in God's presence, beneath the shadow of His wings.

The second song we sang was about giving God control over our lives. The author realized after thousands of attempts to fix their life problems, they realized they can't do it. They realized that trusting in God involves the art of losing ourselves - as the Scripture says: denying ourselves and carrying our cross.

And finally, the song we just sang was a song of hope. We sang about the fact that we are broken, and yet Jesus is our healer. He is our Mighty Savior. And His name is worthy of our highest praises, and honor, and glory. The name of Jesus is matchless. No other name is above His!

And it's in His name that we have hope. But here's the thing about real hope...

Hope is not fully realized without trials.

Why? Sometimes with the things I've been through, I've been tempted to ask God why. *Why do I have to go through these things? Why can't things just be easier? I believe in You! I've chosen to follow You! I'll pursue You wherever You lead me!*

And we know God is overjoyed when we choose to follow Him! All of heaven rejoices! So then, why does life have to be so hard? Why can't it just be easier? After all, Scripture says that if God is for us, who could be against us?

Well, the reality is that when we're faced with difficult things in life, God's desire is for us to see these situations as opportunities that test our faith. Check out these words from James 1...

James 1:2 - Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds,

James 1:3 - because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.

James 1:4 - Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

God knows that when our faith is tested and we persevere, our faith will grow and become more mature. Our faith in Jesus will be stronger because of the trials we went through.

So, while it's not fun for us when we're put through something that really tests our faith, James *celebrates* this kind of testing. He says...

James 1:12 - Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.

We can celebrate with God because He brings us through the trials. However, while we're going through trials, it's easy to be tempted in ways that either lead us to sin or worse, lead us to lose our faith all together.

This is why James makes it a point to say in the next verse that...

James 1:13 - When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone;

James is saying that God will allow us to go through trials that test our faith, however, God is not the one that *tempts* us to turn from Him.

So for example, if we're tempted to trust in ourselves rather than God, that *temptation* is not from God. If we're tempted to abandon God because life seems too difficult, that temptation is not from God.

Okay, so if these temptations don't come from God, where do they come from?

Well, first we have to recognize that we have a **sin nature**. We're *prone to wander*, as the song says. Our sin nature is what hinders us from doing the right thing. As Paul says in...

Romans 7:18 - "For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out."

It's the sin nature inside us that wages war against what we know is good. Paul goes on to say that he's thankful to God, because he is delivered from His sin through Jesus Christ!

So again, the temptations we face can be from our own sin nature. But there's another source - a source that Paul calls **the spiritual forces of wickedness**.

I've often said that we can't blame Satan for everything. I've even said that most likely, Satan doesn't even have time for you and me. We're not exactly important enough on the world stage for him to concern himself with. Besides that, Satan is not like God in that He can be anywhere and everywhere at the same time.

However, Satan does have spiritual forces of wickedness under his command, and their ultimate goal is to see people turn from their faith in Jesus.

I'm convinced that they will do whatever it takes to make our lives miserable... so much so that we're tempted to give up on Jesus.

This is why the work of Satan and his spiritual forces are talked about a lot in the New Testament. It's important to shed light on the enemy. So, that's what we're going to do today. I want us to see several different references to the work of Satan, written for us in Paul's second letter to the Corinthians.

I'm hoping that looking at how the enemy seeks to influence us will help to magnify the glory of Jesus, and at the same time will change our perspective on the difficult times of our life.

The first reference to Satan in 2 Corinthians is in chapter 2.

The Corinthian Church had been going through some rough times. There was a lot of turmoil in the Church for various reasons. But Paul saw this turmoil as an opportunity to show them that their faith was being tested. So he says this...

2 Corinthians 2:9 - Another reason I wrote you was to see if you would stand the test and be obedient in everything.

2 Corinthians 2:10 - Anyone you forgive, I also forgive. And what I have forgiven—if there was anything to forgive—I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake,

2 Corinthians 2:11 - in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes.

And there we have our first observation...

#1: Satan seeks to outwit believers. He unleashes schemes for the purpose of destroying the church. This was as true back then as it is today. And this is why Peter encourages us to *always remain alert*, because the enemy seeks to devour believers.

How does he try to outwit us?

Sometimes his strategy comes in the form of dumping “excessive sorrow” on us after we've done something wrong. Again, in this same passage (2 Corinthians

2), Paul is talking about someone in the church who had caused so much turmoil that they had to cast him out of the church.

But their goal was not to leave him alone. Their goal was for this person to turn from His sin and come back to Jesus and the church family. But now that he has turned from his sin and is back in the church, the temptation for everyone else was to hold his past sins over his head rather than forgive him. So Paul says in verse 7...

2 Corinthians 2:7 - “Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow.”

That “excessive sorrow” is a tool of the enemy. It’s not from God. And remember, this situation was all about healing broken relationships. This person probably betrayed people’s trust. He caused everyone grief. His sinful actions were hindering the Church. But now that he’s repented, *real* forgiveness needs to happen.

And here’s the thing about forgiveness:

Reconciliation cannot happen without forgiveness. That doesn’t mean that we forget what happened. But real forgiveness doesn’t hold on to past sins.

It’s important for us to know as Christians that having an unforgiving spirit is another tool of the enemy. Satan would love for us to hold grudges. He would love for us to not forgive ourselves and other people who sin against us.

And yet, what does God desire? He desires us to forgive other people as He forgave us (Eph. 4:32). How did God forgive us? Fully. Unconditionally.

Even if reconciliation isn’t possible - maybe the other person doesn’t want anything to do with you!? In those situations, it’s still possible to forgive them through the strength that God gives us.

What else does Satan do?

#2: Satan blinds the minds of unbelievers (2 Corinthians 4:4)

2 Corinthians 4:4 - “The god of this age [Satan] has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.”

#3: There is no agreement (harmony) between Satan and Jesus (2 Corinthians 6:15).

#4: Satan seeks to lead our minds astray from our sincere devotion to Jesus (2 Corinthians 11:3).

Paul says Satan often does this through false teachers. The battle for our mind is constant! Think about the shows we watch - the news we read - the social media posts - the banners - the slogans - the images that are put in front of us...

There's so much out there that competes for our attention. Most of us by now probably know that even our smart phones were intentionally designed to keep us looking at the screen?

It's not that using your phone is bad, but it is literally designed to keep your mind going from one thing to the next... and sometimes taking our minds to dark places.

Here's the real danger - When our minds are seduced by the things of this world, we'll be hard pressed to even know what God's will for us is anymore.

Romans 12:2 says, “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is - His good, pleasing and perfect will.”

It's about being in the right frame of mind. I think back to James... and even Paul... both of which celebrate the trials that happen in their lives. *How can they celebrate?! How can they call their trials pure joy?!*

It's because they're allowing Jesus and the Word of God to *renew their mind*. They're seeing their trials from a Jesus perspective.

Case in point - Go ahead and turn with me to 2 Corinthians 12:1...

[Blank] 2 Corinthians 12:1-10 - I must go on boasting. Although there is nothing to be gained, I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord. 2 I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven **[Paul's talking about himself (v6)]**. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know—God knows. 3 And I know that this man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows—4 was caught up to paradise and heard inexpressible things, things that no one is permitted to tell. 5 I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, *except about my weaknesses*.

Interesting. Why would Paul want to boast about his weaknesses? Let's keep reading...

6 Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool, because I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain, so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say, 7 or because of these surpassingly great revelations.

Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan **[angelos Satana]**, to torment **[be hurt through beating]** me. 8 Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me.

9 But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, **so that Christ's power may rest on me**. 10 That is why, for Christ's sake, *I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*

It's interesting that Paul was given this thorn in his flesh in order to keep him from thinking too much of himself. Honestly, it seems kind of harsh doesn't it? But Paul recognizes that ultimately, this was for his benefit.

If it weren't for the thorn in his flesh, Paul seems to imply that he would have become conceited! **It seems that even Paul needed to learn a lesson in humility.**

So, what did Paul learn from his trial? **He learned that God gives us His strength when we are weak.**

Now, I have to say, Paul was given a thorn in the flesh. **But not everything bad that happens in our lives is the result of God giving us a thorn in our flesh.**

Maybe you've heard the saying: *God doesn't give us more than we can handle.* That's actually not a verse in the Bible.

It would be better to say that **when things do happen in our lives, God is there.** We can lean on Him and His strength. And with a Jesus perspective, we can know that even though we might not like the trials we're going through, God can use them to deepen our faith in Him.

Romans 5:1-5 - Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, 2 through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. 3 Not only so, **but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; 4 perseverance, character; and character, hope. 5 And hope does not put us to shame,** because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

Sometimes just knowing that Jesus is with us during our most difficult times in life is the comfort we need. But there will be those times when we feel totally defeated and helpless.

If that's you, it's okay to cry out to God. It's okay to ask *why*. It's okay to voice your frustrations. But it's also helpful to remember how the Lord has been good to you. Remember His promises...

Remember that Jesus promised to always be with us.

Remember that He gives us His strength when we're weak.

Remember that His power is made perfect in weakness.

Remember that His power will rest on us.

Remember that He helps us persevere through all kinds of trials.

And remember that He has given us His Word that gives us hope and assurance in our time of need...

Let's Pray