

Thorns And Thistles

Valley Center Seventh-day Adventist Church

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In standing before you each Sabbath morning, the human agent shrinks from the responsibility of giving words of life to people in need. To give a lecture on how to make lasagna or frame a house would be one thing, but as concerning the mysteries of human existence, as Paul asked, “Who is sufficient for these things?” What can I as a human possibly say to give real help to souls hungering for solutions to problems, answers to needs that I may or may not even know about? I am driven to my knees to seek a message that is not mine, because I recognize that there is no wisdom in me at all. What answers may I give of myself to explain the human condition, much less provide any kind of solution? I am driven to Christ and His Word, and ask that He will give me a message to share with His people that will be timely and appropriate, helpful and encouraging.

Thus the human agent is merely a conduit. The human agent is the casserole dish, while the food is from God. Thus through the “foolishness of preaching” hearts may be stirred, hearts may be healed. Hearts may find salvation in Christ, ultimately for the future kingdom of glory, but also to assist in the walk of the pathway of this life, a pathway that is strewn with thorns and thistles.

When God created this world, it was absolutely perfect in every respect. It’s hard for us to imagine a world like that, because it was very little like what we see around us now. Nobody knew what a thorn or thistle was. There was no pain or sorrow, and death had never been observed. But along with the perfect gifts given to Adam and Eve, God also gave them the freedom to choose and He planted a tree by which they could express their faith and trust in Him, by not eating of it. It was a simple test. Would mankind trust the Word of God and obey Him, or not?

When sin entered, through their disobedience in eating of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, changes began to happen. Immediately, Adam and Eve realized a sense of nakedness and shame they had never experienced before. They experienced guilt, sorrow, regret and fear. These were all feelings that had been unknown to them before. Rather than joyfully anticipating the daily visit of God, they now looked to His coming with dread and foreboding.

When the Lord came and sought them out, He had words that prodded them into a realization of their sin, along with words of hope for a future restoration. He also had words that foretold the path of sorrow they would walk in the meantime.

“To the woman He said: ‘I will greatly multiply your sorrow and your conception; in pain you shall bring forth children; your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.’ Then to Adam He said, ‘Because you have heeded the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree of which I commanded you, saying “You shall not eat of it”; Cursed is the ground for your sake; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you.’” Genesis 3:16-18.

Thorns and thistles. That seems a fitting title for the human condition after the entrance of sin. We wonder, What was it like the first time Eve reached for a rose and cut herself on a thorn? What was it like the first time Adam winced as he stepped on a thistle? What was it like to experience the first toothache, the first headache, the first sprained ankle, the first broken bone? All of these were consequences of the sin that broke the relationship between God and man.

The story of mankind during the ensuing 6,000 years is one cluttered with these effects. It’s a story that brings sadness to the hearts of those who have walked on the pathway, but sadness also to the heart of the Father of mankind, God, Who never wished that pain be felt by His creatures. We’ve all felt the pricks of the thorns and thistles. While at home I rarely wear shoes. So when I go outside to water the garden or gather fruit, I face the choice of putting shoes on or going barefoot. Invariably no shoes are put on, and often I find myself regretting that decision when I step on a sharp thistle or sticker. Ouch! We’ve all felt the physical pain of a splinter, a thumb slammed in a car door and such.

Sometimes it hurts just to recount the episodes when pain was felt. One time my brother was using a spring-style exercise tool that you expanded horizontally by gripping with your hands and stretching it by moving both arms outward. At this time though, he was doing something different with it. He had placed one end of it under his foot, while then doing “arm curls” by stretching his arm upward. Do you have the picture? Unfortunately on this occasion the lower end slipped from under his foot and came up and struck him around his eye. Ouch! It’s a miracle he didn’t lose his sight! I remember the day my younger sister was getting on the school bus and slipped, hitting the steel steps of the bus with her mouth, chipping a tooth. Ouch! I’m sure you’ve had a few experiences like these. Thorns and thistles on the

pathway of life. Can you imagine the world of Adam and Eve in the Garden, not knowing pain?

Maybe more painful than the physical suffering are the experiences that bring emotional trauma. Pain and suffering can come in many packages. Thorns and thistles can have many shapes and forms. Maybe you suffered under the upbringing of an abusive parent, or endured the cruelty of classmates, playmates or siblings. Maybe you agonized under a pitiless and unappreciative boss or grieved over a broken relationship. Some of you have shared a few of the painful experiences you're going through right now, and my heart goes out to you. Or, it may be that you are suffering with pain that is too private to share and you feel alone in your experience of hardship.

Harsh words can bring about untold emotional pain. How often sharp, careless, cruel words can inflict lasting suffering! The one who said, "Sticks and stones can break my bones but names (or "words") can never hurt me," was speaking in an idealistic and unreal atmosphere. Victor K. Pryles wrote something called, "Sticks and stones can break my bones but names can really hurt me."

The wise man Solomon wrote, "A man has joy by the answer of his mouth, and a word spoken in due season, how good it is!" Proverbs 15:23. "The thoughts of the wicked are an abomination to the LORD, But the words of the pure are pleasant." Proverbs 15:26. "Pleasant words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the bones." Proverbs 16:24. But Solomon also wrote, "The words of a talebearer are as wounds, and they go down into the innermost parts of the belly." Proverbs 18:8, KJV. Have you ever discovered the tragic truth of that statement? Someone said, "Keep your words soft and sweet; you'll never know when them you'll eat."

Thorns and thistles. Is there an answer? Is there a reason to have hope? Can we be optimistic? Is there some spiritual nitro-glycerin tablet we can take to ease the heartaches we feel? What can we learn from the Word of God to help us through these times? The Bible doesn't propose to give us all the answers to every one of life's questions; it gives us sufficient answers so that our faith can grow. There will be times when we wrestle with the questions of "Why?" and "How come?" As Paul said, "Now we walk by faith, then by sight."

But we have case studies from which to gain valuable insights. The godly Job suffered patiently under the discipline of trials. He didn't know what we know, as we read the story in the Bible. He didn't know about the conversation that took

place between God and the devil, in which the devil accused God of being unfair and not allowing him access to Job. The devil said, “He only obeys You because You treat him so well. If a few trials come his way, he’ll curse You.”

How did God answer the devil? He said, “Okay, you can do what you want with him. We’ll see if Job remains faithful.” In other words God was saying, “I know Job, and I trust him, that he’ll still love and trust me even when things go wrong.” So the devil got to work and took away Job’s possessions and caused the death of his children. Then he caused grievous sores to afflict Job’s body, and turned his friends and his wife against him. But still Job was true to his God! His faith didn’t fail during the trials!

There was the Gospel preacher Paul who met Jesus on the road to Damascus as he was on his way to persecute Christians. A blinding light stopped him in his tracks and he was afflicted by sightlessness for a short time. Ananias laid his hands on him and his sight returned, but it is evident that his vision wasn’t quite what it used to be. Paul lived the rest of his life with a “thorn in the flesh,” which most Bible students feel was his dimmed eyesight. To his friends in Galatia he wrote, “I bear you witness that, if possible, you would have plucked out your own eyes and given them to me.” Galatians 4:15. Usually a secretary did the writing for Paul (such as Tertius for the book of Romans. See Romans 16:22), but apparently Paul himself wrote the Epistle to the Galatians, though with great difficulty. As he closed the letter he wrote, “See with what large letters I have written to you with my own hand!” Galatians 6:11.

Three times Paul prayed earnestly that this trial be removed from him and Christ responded, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.” II Corinthians 12:9. This is most amazing! Paul, the one who healed the cripple at Lystra and the fever-stricken father of Publius on Malta; Paul, the one through whom “God worked unusual miracles...so that even handkerchiefs or aprons were brought from his body to the sick, and the diseases left them and the evil spirit went out of them” (Acts 19:11, 12) was himself left to struggle with a physical ailment, a “thorn of the flesh.” How do you explain that?

No, the Bible leaves some of life’s situations shrouded in mystery so that our faith can grow. The Bible gives us sufficient light so that we can grasp the basics, so that we can be introduced to Jesus as our personal Friend, but anticipates that we will trust for the answers to those questions not answered today.

Years ago my wife and I became involved in photography. We purchased the equipment to be able to develop pictures in our own little “darkroom,” the bathroom, with the Durst enlarger resting on the vanity and the various trays of developer, wash and fixer placed in proper order. It was fun to watch the paper change and images develop before your eyes. Have you ever done that? To make this possible, we purchased a special light called a “safe light” or “darkroom light” which emitted just enough illumination so that, with our eyes having adjusted, we could see adequately to do the work, but not so bright that it would over-expose the photographic paper and cause it to be ruined. That was critical to the procedure. Of course, when the paper was “fixed,” then it was safe to turn the regular light on again.

How much like life is that process! God allows enough light so that the “image” (His likeness) can be “developed” in our lives. But the light that allows for this to happen is limited. It’s not “full exposure.” Someday, when our characters are “fixed” He will come in His glory and the light will illuminate all questions of life. But today we’re asked, like Job, like Paul, to trust Him. He’s shaping us. He’s imprinting His character, His “picture” in our hearts. Someday we’ll live in the glory of His light which outshines the sun. But that’s not today. Today there are still some unknowns that require faith.

There are three lessons the Bible teaches that are helpful in relating to trials. First, the Bible teaches us that we can expect that life on this earth will not be “perfect.” Knowing the Bible story of a gracious God who created a flawless world but gave His creatures a test of loyalty, which they failed and thus brought about the painful effects of sin, helps us to realize that those thorns and thistles will be on our path. It’s unavoidable. There’s a psychological law that says “Frustration and disappointment come from unrealized expectations.” If what meets us in life is different than what we expect, we will be let down. If we think that we’re going to be exempt from all trials, that we’ll never step on a thistle or scratch our hand on a thorn, we’re bound for disappointment. It’s important to realize that trials, pain and suffering will become part of our life experience. You might as well expect them.

Jesus said, “In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.” John 16:33. As strange as it may seem, those words were preceded by His statement, “These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace.” Jesus said plainly that there would be trials, but that if we’re “in Him” we can have peace during tribulations! And remember, these words were spoken just hours before the agonizing experience of Gethsemane and Golgotha. Jesus didn’t say, “You might have tribulation,” or “It’s remotely possible that trials

will cross your path.” Jesus wanted us to know what we will encounter in this land of the enemy. You can expect trials and difficulties, thorns and thistles. Peter wrote, “Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you.” I Peter 4:12.

Think of this also: God had to allow the thorns and thistles so that we would look forward to the land of promise. If this world were perfect, if God always intervened and intercepted or counteracted the cause and effect progression of sin, the falling of the dominoes of tragedy, why would we look for something else? Expect thorns and thistles in this life. God forewarned us before mankind left the Garden.

Secondly, another principle the Bible brings out is that everyone of us walks on this same pathway. We may not cover the exact same territory, but the path is the same. God watches over us, and does not allow the trial to exceed our capacity. Paul explained, “No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, Who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it.” I Corinthians 10:13.

What a beautiful thought that is! We’re tempted to feel that “No one can understand what I’m going through,” and Satan leads us to walk in the shadows of self-pity. While it may be true that each has a unique experience in this life, all share in the experience of trial and suffering. All walk the same path, strewn with thorns and thistles. And God has promised that He is there to help and will provide a way of escape “that we will be able to bear it.” God’s solution is not to evade the trial, but to endure it, learn from it, overthrow it and be strengthened by it. Paul wrote, “Who shall separate from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, ‘For Your sake we are killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.’ Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.” Romans 8:35-37.

Job used some pretty strong language when he expressed his complaint and lack of understanding about his situation. His testimony was, “He (God) has worn me out; You have made desolate all my company, You have shriveled me up, and it is a witness against me; my leanness rises up against me and bears witness to my face. He tears me in His wrath, and hates me; He gnashes at me with His teeth; my adversary sharpens His gaze on me. I was at ease, but He has shattered me; He also has taken me by my neck, and shaken me to pieces; He has set me up for His

target, His archers surround me, He pierces my heart and does not pity; He pours out my gall on the ground. He breaks me with wound upon wound; He runs at me like a warrior (literally a “giant”).” Job 16:7-14.

But even though Job could not understand all there was to know about his trials, his faith was not shaken. He later confessed, “But He knows the way that I take; when He has tested me, I shall come forth as gold. My foot has held fast to His steps; I have kept His way and not turned aside. I have not departed from the commandment of His lips; I have treasured the words of His mouth more than my necessary food.” Job 23:10-12.

We’ve seen that the Bible teaches us to expect trials. We’ve seen that the Bible teaches that we’re not alone; that every human being has had their share of experience with the thorns and thistles. But beyond that, there’s something even more, and that is to know that God Himself, in the Person of Jesus Christ, lived on this earth and experienced the “thorns and thistles.” It is amazing to think that God, Who spoke those words of judgment against Adam and Eve, came here and encountered them Himself. He took the curse!

In the Garden of Eden He told Eve that there would be sorrow and pain in conception and giving birth, yet in the Garden of Gethsemane He felt His soul overwhelmed by a supernatural sorrow as He travailed to bring forth salvation! He told Adam that by the sweat of his brow he would earn his bread, yet Jesus came here and sweat drops of blood to form the bread of life! He told them about the thorns and thistles, yet He came here and felt personally the daggers of the crown of thorns pressed about His gentle brow! Jesus knows about trials and suffering. The One Who now sits at the right hand of the Father, the One to Whom is committed all judgment knows about the thorns and thistles.

He endured much more than we will ever be called to bear. He knows all about rejection and betrayal. Yet He bore trials without a whisper of complaint. He breathed a prayer of forgiveness for those who drove nails through His hands and feet. This Jesus is a Friend of those who suffer. This Jesus is a Companion to those who walk this path of thorns and thistles.

In the most well-known of all psalms, David wrote, “The LORD is my Shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters; He restores my soul.” Psalm 23:1-3. In the Greek Old Testament, the Septuagint, the word translated “soul” is psyche. The Lord is the One Who heals our minds, our “psyche.” He is the divine Psychiatrist. There may be a place for

Christian counselors, but never forget that Jesus is the only One Who can truly heal our souls. He can “restore our psyche.” He can give us a new way of thinking, a new mind.

If we continually dwell on the hurts and pains of the past, emotional, spiritual and physical health will be jeopardized. Jesus wants us to live in contentment and peace. He wants us to be guilt free in the knowledge that if we have confessed and forsaken them, He has forgiven us our sins.

In this world, there will be thorns and thistles, but Jesus points us forward to the day when the curse will be gone. Every effect of sin will be erased. God’s great plan of redemption will become a reality and the eternity He has envisioned all along will commence.

Today, are you burdened with trials? Turn to Jesus and tell Him all about them. He will hear; He will listen; He will understand. He may not remove the trial, but He will stand beside you and give you faith and strength to bear under it.