

Thorns

by Vance Havner

The sermon emphasizes the problem of thorns, which represent trouble, heartache, pain, sorrow, and sin, and encourages the listener to trust in God's sovereignty and plan.

Duration: 34:05

Scripture: Mark 4:1, 2 Corinthians 12:9, Ephesians 6:4, Colossians 1:24

Topics: "Cares"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher emphasizes the importance of starting the day early and cultivating the heart like a field. He uses the analogy of farming to explain that if we don't sow the seed of the Word of God and nurture it, our lives will be filled with negativity and distractions. The preacher also highlights the need for repentance and spiritual discipline, warning against a casual approach to faith. He encourages believers to prioritize their spiritual growth and not be consumed by worldly distractions. Additionally, he reminds the congregation of the hope of eternal life and the promise of promotion in God's kingdom for those who remain faithful.

Transcript

Some of us have had so much adversity we feel that we could identify with Burr Rabbit, who you remember was born and bred in a briar patch. The Bible gives us light on this subject and much information about thorns and thistles and their significance, and it'll help us to understand these prickly problems of our existence, what they mean and how, to use another phrase in this connection, how to grasp firmly the nettle. That's an old expression, and that means when a tough problem comes along, don't monkey with it, grasp firmly the nettle and you'll get along better.

And so as we find our way through the briars and brambles of our troubled lives, it's well to remember at least four things that the Word of God sets forth about them, and you start really in Genesis at the very beginning. In the third chapter, you read that God said to Adam, verse 17, Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree of which I commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it, cursed is the ground for thy sake, in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life. Thorns also, and thistles, shall it bring forth to thee, and thou shalt eat the herb of the field.

In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat it, till thou return unto the ground, for out of it was thou taken, for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return. That was the beginning of a long, slow process still going on. In the beginning God made Adam and Eve and put them in the garden.

It was beautiful, every prospect was pleasing, and not even man was vile. It wasn't chaos, it was cosmos then. But the devil came, and Adam and Eve ate us out of house and home, and God said to Adam, Thorns and thistles, it'll be your lot from here on, and all that they represent, trouble, heartache, pain, sorrow, sin.

The natural world is covered with them, and we have to contend through our mortal existence with briars and thistles and weeds and weather and bugs and beetles, and the garden reverts quickly to the briars and neglect the battle for a few days and you've almost lost the war with your garden. Children are like that, sweet as they are, they incline to evil and have to be trained in the way they should go. They remember the bad so long and forget so easily the good.

In sin did our mothers conceive us. I heard of an old preacher who had preached a great sermon on the depravity of the human heart. Somebody came up after the meeting and said, I just can't swallow this depravity of the human heart you're preaching about.

The old preacher said, you don't have to swallow it, it's already in you. And it is. So we see that the heart is deceitful and desperately wicked.

Jeremiah 4, verse 3 says, Break up your fallow ground and sow not among thorns. That's a wise admonition. Some Bible teaching today is almost wasted because it's like scattering seed in the brier patch.

The heart has not been prepared for it. And Jesus told us about the different kinds of sowing. You remember what he said in Matthew 13, some seed fell among thorns, and the thorns sprung up and choked them.

And then he explained it in verse 22. He also that received seed among the thorns, as he that heareth the word, and the care of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, choke the word, and ye becometh unfruitful. The evolutionist, of course, has his way of explaining everything.

He says we're on the way up. We started out in a low form of animation, and we're on our way by fetishism, totemism, polytheism, monotheism, on our way up to a knowledge of God. The Bible says just the other way around.

We started with the knowledge of God and been going down ever since. It's not evolution, it's devolution. Burbank could take a wild rose and turn it into an American beauty, and some folks say that proves evolution.

No, it just simply proves restoration to what it was at one time. If he can make crab apples fit to eat, that's not evolution, that's restoration to something of their original state. It's a world of thorns and thistles, physically, naturally, morally, spiritually.

When God created the earth, the old blueprints did not include sin, and sickness, and disease, and death, and tornadoes, and earthquakes, and all the rest of it. It was never the original purpose of God, not in his mind to send these devastating things to wipe out whole neighborhoods and kill innocent people. The weather is a matter about which we somehow haven't had very clear thinking.

I hear some people say, well, God sent it, and I think they need to think a little and get straight on it, because the weather, like everything else, was in pretty good shape until the devil got into the picture. And

I don't believe that anything like Camille, some of you remember reading about that, and I was down on the coast in meetings not long after that horrible thing came through, and they said that next morning you couldn't hear a bird singing, people spoke in whispers. One man said to me, everything I had in this world disappeared.

I don't know where it went. And that raises some questions. The weather is beautiful when it behaves, you see.

But my Bible doesn't explain how God began. It starts out in the beginning, God. It does not explain evil.

It starts out with the serpent in the garden. When man listened to the devil instead of God, God said, all right, from here on you sweat it out. Now, we've invented machines to get out of work.

We want a three-day work week, more leisure. I don't know what we'd do with it, considering the way most folks use what they've got. But we're still under the sentence, and some get such a need to escape from it that they become all the more tangled up in thorns and thistles, the invisible kind, if not the visible, and the whole creation groans and travails together.

Standing on tiptoe, one of the translations puts it, waiting for the manifestation of the sons of God. John Stott, that splendid preacher of England, is a bird watcher, and I have a close kinship with that sort of thing. John Stott was preaching recently over there, and he said, consider the fowls of the air.

He said, now, that means watch birds. Well, that's a kind of a literal translation, I guess you'd call it. This morning I got up quite early.

The worst thing about people who get up early, they're always bragging about it. We just love to brag about it. It makes other people feel guilty, you know, and asserts our superiority.

But I go up this hill over here, and I've been doing that, you know, for quite a while, and for the last several times I've had music along the way, even on a foggy morning like this. There's a little hooded warbler down here. Most folks don't know it ever exists, but I suppose it's a great, great, grandson of the one that was singing the first time.

And then there's the indigo bunting over on this side, and I hear the wood thrush, my favorite, some distance away, singing, not singing, chiming his vespers at the end of a perfect day. Somebody said, if a man seven feet tall came along blowing a flute, what would you call that? Somebody said, I'd call that highfalutin. Well, a wood thrush does a lot of highfalutin, if you believe me.

And I thought this morning as I trudged up that way about old William Law, a great old Saint who said, Who am I till I folded up in the bed late of a morning when the farmers have already gone about their work and I'm so far behind with my sanctification? I love that. Do you have some trouble along that line? You haven't arrived. I can see that.

I wouldn't believe it if you told me so anyhow. But we are far behind. We might differ.

We could get in a lively argument here tonight on some aspects of sanctification, maybe. But one thing I think we'll agree upon, if we're honest, we're all behind with our sanctification. It's a good thing to get up early and get a good start.

Jesus spoke of vineyards and farming and the soil and gave us a parable of four kinds of it. And the human heart's like a field, and if we don't sow the seed of the word of God and cultivate it, we reap a life of weeds and thorns and thistles. You can't raise a crop to the glory of God unless you break the soul of the heart in repentance and cultivate it and water it and fight the weeds and contend with the bugs and the wind and the weather spiritually speaking.

You can't read this book once in a while and pray when you get in a pinch and go to the house of God when you feel like it and watch garbage all week on television and first thing on in the morning, last thing off at night and bear spiritual fruit. Our children have been neglected, pernicious educational theories, self-expression, freedom to do as one pleases, a harvest of johnnies that can't read, a record year of teenage suicide, teenage unmarried mothers, dope addicts and drunkards. Churches are full of backsliders, immature Christians who've neglected their Bibles and their prayer and neglected to bring up children and nurture and admonition of the Lord.

And until we repent and until more repentance is preached, old Joseph Parker says, if you ever preach it, you're sticking your neck out. And how about it today? That was his time when he said that. Until the fowler grounds broken up, we sow among thorns.

And when Adam and Eve disobeyed God, God started a new plan of redemption for humanity. The whole creation was to be reclaimed. And he called out the Hebrew nation to be the channel through which the Savior came.

And he led his people into the promised land. And when they had conquered a great deal of it, he had more to say about thorns. You read about it in Numbers and chapter 33.

He said, Now you're going to live among a crowd that has no place for me. If you will not drive out the inhabitants of the land before you, then it shall come to pass that those which you let remain among you shall be pricks in your eyes and thorns in your sides and shall vex you in the land wherein you dwell. And he said practically the same thing over in the book of Joshua.

And know for a certainty, chapter 23, verse 13, that the Lord your God will no more drive out any of these nations from before you, but they shall be snares and traps unto you and scourges in your sides and thorns in your eyes until you perish from off this good land which the Lord your God hath given you. It's amazing how the Jew has retained his identity through all these centuries. You find them everywhere, but never assimilated.

We Christians are a chosen generation and a royal priesthood and a holy nation of peculiar people. Jesus came first to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Don't ever forget that.

They wouldn't have him. They didn't receive him. His own received him not, but as many as received him became members of this new race, those that are the sons, the children of God.

God wants his people to be distinct and separate from anybody else on the earth, and not a physical separation. Paul said something about in 1 Corinthians 5, 10, you can't isolate yourself. We must be among them to reach them.

Some of the old mystics back in the Middle Ages tried hiding in caverns and all that sort of thing. We call them mystics. I think some of them were mistakes.

You do not get holier because you're hiding a hole in the ground. It takes more than a hole to make you holier, and they tried to get away from all kind of evil with that sort of business. But that's not the way you do it.

But there is a sense in which we are as Romans 12, 2 says, don't let yourself be squeezed into the mold of this age. The professing church today has been taken over by the world, and it leaned in the Babylon of Revelation, the world church. No Christian culture.

This is the devil's age, and as I've said here already this week, there's never been a culture since Christianity began where a Christian feels at home. If you feel at home in this thing as it is today, you are at home. You've never come out.

Birds of a feather flock together, and it depends on the crowd you like to be with as to who you are and which group is your group. I don't mind saying I'm homesick for heaven. Some folks say that's morbid, and you shouldn't be that way.

I don't know how you feel about it, but I'm kind of looking forward to it myself. It's the hope, you know. I heard of a poor fellow seasick some time ago on a boat.

He lost breakfast, lunch, and supper, and was leaning over the rail in dejection and despair. And one of these cheerful mortals that always shows up, you know, when you don't need him, came along, slapped him on the back, said, chair up. Seasickness never killed anybody.

Poor fellow said, don't tell me that. It's the hope of dying that's kept me alive this long. And I want to say to you that it's the hope of dying that keeps me going sometimes.

Thank God I'm not going to stick around here forever. And a lot of our people don't realize that we're going to be promoted. The Bible teaches that.

You've been faithful over five cities. I'll give you ten cities. His servants shall serve him, sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

I hear about so-and-so died an untimely death. No such thing. If they're in the will of God, they've been promoted too young.

No, no. God knows what he's doing. We're in line for promotion, and the best is yet to come.

I don't want to sit on a cloud with a halo on one side of my head plucking a harp all through eternity. I want to do something. I've been busy here.

I've got a hope. We must watch the company we keep while we're here. Evil communications corrupt good manners.

Paul quoted that from Menander, the poet. And you have to watch where you go and what you do. I heard of a lady who wanted to see the inside of a coal mine, never had been down in there.

And she was wearing a spotless white dress. And the man at the door said, You can't go in there like that. She said, What's to keep me from going in wearing a white dress? He said, Nothing but a lot to keep you from wearing a white dress out.

And that thing is true when we expose ourselves to things that we shouldn't have anything to do with. Now, if you mix and mingle with this world, the Bible says they'll become thorns in your side and corrupt your lives and your testimony. That's where marrying unbelievers and all the rest of this comes in.

We must be careful. We're not in a collusion course with this world. We're in a collision course.

That's different. That's something altogether different. Whosoever be a friend of the world is the enemy of God.

Then there is a third. You have thorns and creation. You have thorns and Canaan.

And you have thorns and the Christian. And you have anticipated me already. And you're thinking about Paul and his thorn in the flesh.

I don't know what it was, and I'm glad I don't. It might be yours, might be mine. We can all claim it.

I don't know whether it was our trouble or not. I know it was an affliction, whatever it was, that God wouldn't take away. And the great preacher who had healed other people was not delivered himself.

And I'm not trying to figure that out either. From whatever plague or infirmity it was, God didn't heal him. He was the prisoner who freed other people.

And sometimes there is that contradiction, and we don't understand it. But Paul identified this trouble. We have a habit of glorifying our affliction instead of glorifying God in the affliction.

He didn't glorify it. He said that thorn was a messenger of the devil. We want to get our origins straight in this thing.

Give everybody their due, including the devil. He gloried in infirmity, but he didn't glorify infirmity. Jesus said, This woman whom Satan hath bound.

That's the straight of it. Paul wrote to the Thessalonians and said, I wanted to visit you, but he didn't say as we preachers do, and it sounds so lovely the way we say it, we were providentially hindered. He didn't say that.

He said, Satan hindered me. Let's get the thing straight, like he did. God permitted Satan to afflict Job, but don't blame God.

Sickness, disease, death, all our other thorns are of the devil, but allowed sometimes of God to test us and to glorify himself. God lets some things happen. God makes some things happen, but nothing ever just happens.

So there's order to it after all. And sometimes it looks like God uses the devil's grindstone to sharpen his ax. After all, he takes a grindstone, you can't sharpen an ax on a cake of butter.

And he takes affliction, and sometimes God allows it to be used. We're having a new kind of preaching going around these days, that if you are sick or down and speech and so on, that you're living in sin and something the matter with you. If you don't get healed because you didn't have faith enough, didn't pray enough and so on.

Some of the greatest saints I've ever known made their way through this world with afflicted bodies and tortured minds and marital problems and financial distress and tragic circumstances. And our pet little answers and our pet little explanations offer no solution. Prayer doesn't remove them sometimes.

Sometimes the most awful things strike some of the best of people. I won't forget hearing Ben Haden tell, oh what a preacher that man is. Hearing him tell about some years ago, Dr. Barnhouse told of being in a certain church for a conference with a young pastor and his wife, and they were expecting their first child.

And they had a good time that week. Barnhouse teased them, and they were in good natured anticipation. Barnhouse said near the close of the week, preacher didn't show up in time for the service, and Barnhouse rather was pretty sure he knew what the reason was.

And he said, as I was nearly through preaching, I just took over, and as I was nearly through preaching, the preacher slipped in and took a seat. And his face was a picture of utter and abject despair. And after the benediction, he came up and said, doctor, we have become the parents of a mongoloid child, and how am I going to tell her if she doesn't know it yet? Well, he told her, and she went to pieces for a few moments, but being the Christian she was, she speedily got controlled by the Spirit of God.

She said, I'm going to call mother, tell mother, and she put the call in, and the operator of the switchboard in the hospital was an unbeliever and a rather hard type. She said, okay, she knew about these circumstances. She said, we'll see now what these Christians do when everything falls in on them.

And when mother answered the end of the line, this young mother said, mama, God has given us a mongoloid child. And then she gave a wonderful testimony. Next Sunday the young preacher preached and gave his invitation, dropped his head.

He really wasn't used to seeing many people come forward. When the song ended and he raised up and looked, there stood the switchboard operator and several nurses. And it was summed up in one thing, whatever your wife has that can meet a situation like that, we won't.

Now, there are still things you might question in all these circumstances, but somehow and somehow deep under all this. You see, there's a place for the thorn in the flesh again and again. And remember that in Hebrews 11, that Westminster Abbey of the heroes of faith, some of them, oh, you talk about victorious lifers, they were it.

They just marched over mountains and everything else, who through faith subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, escaped the age of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, waxed valiant in fight, turned to flight the armies of the aliens, women received their dead raised to life again. And then all at once right in the middle of all that victorious onward march and others didn't fare so well. You know it, you've read it many a time.

They had trial of cruel mockings and scourgings and bonds and imprisonment. They were stoned. And have you ever imagined, is there any more awful way to leave this world than to be sewn asunder? And that comes next.

Tempted, slain with the sword, wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, afflicted, tormented, of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains and in dens and caves of the earth. So this preaching to the effect that if you just follow Jesus, everything will be peaches and cream from then on is nonsense, because my New Testament's got a lot of suffering in it, suffering of

the saints.

Now sometimes they bring it on, yes, but oh, let's get a clear insight in this thing. Paul had that trip to the third heaven, you know, in 2 Corinthians 12. He went all the way from height to depth, and then he came back to medium, to the middle ground.

My grace is sufficient, just like he sang about a while ago. Paul had one great experience in the third heaven, but he couldn't tell about it after he got back. If some preachers would have something like that, you'd never hear the last of it.

You go around lecturing, you're going to get my address, be illustrated in technicolor tonight, about my trip to the third heaven. Well, Paul couldn't tell about it, but he learned one thing. God's strength is made perfect in weakness when I'm weak and I'm strong.

And there's Colossians 1.24, and I don't pretend to know what all this means. I'm filling up what's left behind of the sufferings of Christ. Now that certainly doesn't mean the sufferings of Christ for our sin, because that was taken care of once for all.

But we have been left a residue and a heritage of suffering in the name of the Lord Jesus. How much of it have we known anything about? That's something to ponder, beloved. Paul said, I'm filling up my part of it.

But when we've exhausted our store of endurance, our strength fails as the day is half done. We reach the end of our hoarded resources. Our Father's love has only begun.

It's worth a thorn in the flesh to learn that, and usually that's about the only way you learn it. One other thorn stands out in this study, and you have anticipated me again. Is there any deliverance from the thorns of creation, the thorns of Canaan, the thorns of the Christian? Yes, and they are symbolized by the thorns in the crown of Christ.

You know about that. Matthew 27, 29, Mark 15, 17, John 19, 2, all done in mockery, and yet why was it thorns? Why didn't they put some kind of a wreath on him? Why thorns? They didn't know what they were doing. The soldiers didn't know any more than when they nailed him to the cross and the Savior, Lord forgive them, they don't know what they're doing.

They didn't know any more than Caiaphas did when he prophesied that the salvation that was to come and the gathering of the people. They didn't know. But that crown of thorns was emblematic and symbolic of all the thorns of all time, a thorny creation ruined by sin, a thorny evil society like the Canaanites, thorns in the flesh that torment the people of God.

My friend James Robinson, the evangelist, sends out a picture that he did to his TV listeners. I got one of them. It's not a pretty picture.

I had it hanging over my desk. I didn't even frame it. I wanted it to hang there in all its ugliness because so many of these pictures of our Lord in the garden, they don't look like he's suffering much.

Some of them look like he's just suffering a minor inconvenience, but not this one. And there's my Lord holding on to a rock, as it were, there in the garden and out there. You barely can make out those sleeping disciples and the cross up there in the sky of what's coming tomorrow.

He's at the end of the road. I have an artist friend in Maryland, Ken Hudler, who paints nothing but the sufferings of Christ. Now, he knows that no pen, no brush can depict all of that, but he has a try at it because it's so much on his heart.

And he doesn't have a pretty picture in the book. I have the book of it. Some of them are frightful.

And when they took my Lord down from the cross, his visage was so marred to be exact in the translation and interpretation, he didn't look like a man. So battered was he. And that's encouragement for some of us who have seen precious ones go away who didn't look like themselves, because it's the guarantee of a day when we'll all look better.

I sat all day beside the one who meant more to me than anybody else in this world. She was already dead, except that the machinery kept the heartbeat going. The doctor said she's dead.

Cold comfort that was. But I held her hand, a cold hand, all day. And I found myself saying, Lord, help me to remember the way she did look and to think about the way she's going to look, but help me to forget the way she does look.

Many more have had that experience. That's wrapped up in this crown of thorns. Creation is going to be redeemed.

The original beauty restored. God's not going to let the devil get away with the mess he's made down here, and we've helped him out. And there won't be any more Canaanites in the land, in evil society, for the saints shall reign and rule.

I get a lot of pleasure out of that. I go around sometimes and I get to a new town in the residential section. I run into the district that says, keep off the grass, don't trespass private property.

And I say, that's all right, you can have it. Now it's going to be mine anyhow one of these days. The meek shall inherit the earth.

I said, friend, you've got the lease, but I've got the deed. So we've got a great time coming. And all thorns in the flesh will be no more because you won't have any more.

You'll have your new Easter outfit on that great getting up morning. We're wearing out. No more evidence of that than others at the present time, but there are.

Some of you are looking at me through those trifocals. You've got your teeth in your pocket. Bless your heart, you're getting along the best way you can.

I heard of a little old six-year-old, been out in the sun too long, was peeling off. And he was walking, he said, just look at that. He said, six years old and wearing out already.

Well, we are. When I look at this face in the mirror, you know, one verse comes to me again and again, it does not yet appear what we shall be. I said, Lord, you've got to improve on this.

And I think he will. But bless God, it was all wrought out in Calvary, in the open grave. The signs of his return multiply.

Keep your eyes up in the eastern sky. God will keep his commitment to the chosen people, Israel, and his commitment to the purchased people of his church. And instead of the thorn shall come up the fir tree, and instead of the brow shall come up the myrtle tree, and it shall be to the Lord for a name, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.

Does Jesus care? He certainly does. That's why he came. And God cares.

And sometimes you get rather old by the vastness of this universe and you think, well, how could God possibly have any interest in poor little me? He doesn't even know I'm around. And that reminds us of that immortal poem about the two little girls in the children's home. And one said to the other, I want to pray, but how will God know I'm here? The other little girl said, well, put your hands out on top of the counterpane instead of under it, and say, Lord, I'm the little girl with her hands out on the counterpane.

I know you smile at that, but sometimes we wish we could somehow impress the Lord that this is me, Lord, and you know what a fix I'm in. And he does care. I don't know how he does it, but don't forget that he is infinite.

And he not only can keep all these stars where they belong, but he can keep us where we belong if we let him. And so it was all gathered up in its time, we not only sang with our lips, but cried out from our hearts, King of my life, I crown thee now, thine shall the glory be, lest I forget thy thorn-crowned brow. Lead me to Calvary.

Or see from his head, his hands, his feet, sorrow and love flow mingled down. Did e'er such love and sorrow meet, or thorns compose so rich a crown? Before you leave tonight, I want you to sing that other crown-of-thorns verse. I love thee because thou hast first loved me, and purchased my pardon on Calvary's tree.

I love thee for wearing the thorns on thy brow. If ever I loved thee, my Jesus, it is now.

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