

# Prickly Problems of This Existence

by Vance Havner

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*The sermon emphasizes the presence of thorns and thistles in our lives, but also highlights the sufficiency of God's love and grace in the midst of difficulties.*

**Duration:** 29:45

**Scripture:** Genesis 3:18, Numbers 33:55, Psalm 23:5, Isaiah 55:10-11, Matthew 13:7, Romans 8:18, 2 Corinthians 12:7-10

**Topics:** "Problems"

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## Description

The sermon transcript discusses the current state of some churches, describing them as '25 miles wide, one-inch deep.' The speaker shares personal experiences of preaching at the First Baptist Church of Charleston and interacting with military personnel. The sermon emphasizes the importance of understanding God's original purpose, present purpose, and future purpose, as outlined in Romans 8:28. The speaker also highlights the need for believers to persevere through challenges and reminds them of the ultimate redemption and manifestation of the sons of God.

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## Transcript

The Bible has much to say about thorns and thistles and briars and brambles. Over 20 words are used to name 200 varieties of prickly shrubs that grew in Bible countries. We have plenty of them over here.

We've been scratched and irritated and lacerated and torn, and if you grew up in the country, you have probably wondered why such pesky pests, along with other things like mosquitoes, were ever created to start with. That's one thing I want to figure out hereafter, what was the idea in a mosquito? Thorns and thistles are symbols of troubles and trials and testings and tribulations. And some of us have had so much of all that that we feel like we can identify with Burr Rabbit, who was born and bred in a briar patch.

The Bible gives us light on this subject and a lot of information about thorns and thistles and their significance, and I think to look at it a moment will help us with some of these prickly problems of our existence and what the old word means that we sometimes use is, grasp firmly the nettle. When some difficult thing has to be handled, when you grasp a nettle, don't fool around with it, grip it in your hand, it won't hurt as much. And that's true with other problems, too.

We get a start way back in Genesis at the very beginning. God put Adam and Eve in the garden, and it was beautiful, and every prospect was pleasing, and not even man was vile then. It wasn't chaos, it was cosmos then, but the devil came.

And as I said yesterday, Adam and Eve ate us out of house and home, and God said to Adam, now you've got to go to work. In the third chapter, verse 18, well, verse 17 really, unto Adam he said, 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 bread, till thou return unto the ground, for out of it was thou taken, for thus thou art, and unto thus shalt thou return. And it's been that way ever since, thorns and thistles, and they represent trouble and heartache and pain and sorrow and sin.

The natural world has to contend with briars and thistles and weeds and weather and bugs and beetles all the time. I watched some of the boys out in the boat this morning spraying some kind of solution for weed control in the lake. And the garden, if you don't stay close by and in it, the middle of it, that garden reverts in a few days back to briars.

And if you neglect the battle a couple of days, you've lost the war. And that's true, alas, with children, because they're children of Adam to begin with, and there's an inclination toward evil, and you have to train them in the way they ought to go, for the human heart is deceitful and desperately wicked. And it's amazing how they will forget some good thing you tried to teach them, and then something that they heard they shouldn't have heard somewhere sticks.

Now, I'm sure a lot of parents can testify to that here this morning. In Jeremiah 4.3 we're told, Break up your fallow ground, and sow not among thorns. Now, you know what fallow ground is.

It is unproductive because it's undisturbed. Churches get like that sometimes. Christians get like that, and the plow needs to be put in.

To use another figure, we're settled on our leaves and have not been emptied from vessel to vessel. Revival churns up the people and empties the church from one vessel to another. I really wonder whether it is possible to have a deep revival in a shallow generation, because our Lord told us that the soil has a lot to do with it.

And he told us about that type of soil, thorny soil, that represents, he said, People who hear the word and anon with joy receive it, but have no depth and no root. Now, they come down to church aisles every Sunday with a smile on their faces. What are you going to do? They say, Well, I accept, yes, I believe.

But the first wind of persecution blows some of them over. Shallow. Somebody asked a pastor the other day, How large is your pastor? And he said, It's twenty-five miles wide and one inch deep.

And that's just about the situation in some of our churches today. I preached for five years in the First Baptist Church of Charleston, South Carolina. They have a wonderful military college there, the Citadel.

And I gave the baccalaureate once and conducted chaplain a number of times. And old General Summerall, who fought beside MacArthur in World War I, was a commandant. He was a great soldier and, I think, a Christian.

He was an old soldier. And I remember that one time after I had talked, we marched out. And you don't often get to march with a sure enough general.

So I tried to keep step the best I could. We got out there and he took my hand and said, Thank you. You get under these boys' hides.

And that's all he said. Because he never did say much. And I took that as a compliment because, my soul, we need preaching today that gets under the hide and breaks up the fallow ground.

Because if we don't break up that fallow ground, we're going to have a lot of thorns. You go over to the New Testament and there's more about that in Matthew 13. Some of the seed fell among thorns.

Verse 7, And the thorns sprung up and choked them. And then in the interpretation in verse 22, He also that received seed among the thorns is he that heareth the word, and the care of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches choked the word, and he becometh unfruitful. That's what happens when we don't really heed the word of God and do something about it.

Now, this old earth is degenerating. The evolutionists tell us that man came up through fetishism, and totemism, and polytheism, and monotheism. We're on our way up to a knowledge of God.

But the Bible says man started with a knowledge of God and been going down ever since. That's not evolution. That's devolution.

Burbank might be able to turn a wild rose into an American beauty, and he might be able to make crab apples fit to eat. But that's not evolution. That's just restoration back to what they were.

We're living in a world of thorns and thistles physically, and naturally, morally, spiritually. When God created the earth, the original blueprints did not include sin, and sickness, and disease, and death, and bloodshed, and wars, and earthquakes, and disasters, and floods, and tornadoes. God didn't have that in the original plan.

Now, the weather is beautiful when it behaves. But sometimes it misbehaves. And this spring of 77 over the country gave us an illustration of that.

I preached along the Gulf Coast way back when Camille, that awful, awful hurricane hit the coast. Never forget what the people said. They said next morning you couldn't hear a bird singing.

People talked in whispers. One man said everything I had in this world just disappeared. I don't know where it went.

Now, God didn't plan that in the original blueprints. The Bible doesn't explain how God began. It starts in the beginning, God.

It doesn't explain the problem of evil in the beginning, the serpent. That's what you have. When man listened to the devil instead of to God, God said from here on you sweat it out.

I just read it. We invent machines to get out of work. We're headed for a three-day work week, I guess.

Although God said work six. We're still under the sentence. We try to escape.

We get all tangled up in thorns and thistles, the invisible and the visible kind. I get amused. I'm in Florida a lot in the winter and I watch all these folks come in, you know, trying to get away from it all.

They got it all with them. They got all the furniture they can lug and the wife and the kids and the dog. I watch them unload one morning, load up next morning.

I don't call that a vacation. They didn't get away from it. They've got it right there with them.

And we're trying to get away, but the whole creation groans and travails together, waiting for the redemption and manifestation of the sons of God. I'm a birdwatcher. I make no apologies.

John Stott of England is a birdwatcher. He preached the other Sunday. They say in his church on consider the fowls of the air.

And he said that means watch birds. Well, it does. And I watch them.

And my favorite's the wood thrush. And I've stood many a time in the late afternoon and listened to that flutist. He's the flutist among the birds.

Hello. Who was it the other day said if a man seven feet tall came along blowing a flute, what would you say? And the other fellow said I'd call that highfalutin. Well, the wood thrush does a lot of highfalutin.

And I love it. And I love it. And yet, you know, beloved, sometimes as I listen to that and to others of the songsters that God has given us, I can't prove it, and you can't disprove it.

I could quote Dr. Robertson, the great Greek scholar. I could quote some of our hymn writers, old John Keeble. I could quote him and Goethe, the German writer.

We're all just saying it. But I have a feeling, you have a sense of something there that you can't quite describe, a longing on the part of a creation under the reign of tooth and claw, a longing for something out on the edge of the Sahara Desert. Two men were trying to sleep one night, and they couldn't.

One couldn't because of an unearthly sound. And he woke up there and said, What is that? The other said, That's the desert sighing. And that's a pretty good description.

We're living in a creation that's sighing. And after Adam and Eve disobeyed God, he started a new plan of redemption for humanity and for the whole creation, called out the Hebrew nation to be the channel through which the Savior would come. And then he led them into the promised land, and when they had conquered much of it and settled, he gave them a warning about thorns.

Said in Numbers 33, If you don't drive out the inhabitants of the land from before you, then it shall come to pass that those which you let remain of them shall be pricks in your eyes and thorns in your sides and shall vex you in the land wherein you dwell. And Joshua says almost the same thing. If ye do in any wise go back and cleave unto the remnant of those nations, even these which remain among you shall make marriages with them and go in unto them.

And they to you know for a certainty 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 eyes and thorns in your eyes until ye perish from off the good land which the Lord your God giveth thee. Now there's the second of the thorns, the thorns of the Canaanites, and we still have them. It's amazing how the Jews have retained their identity through all these centuries.

You find them everywhere, and they've never been assimilated. We Christians are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy people. And Jesus came first to the low sheep of the house of Israel, and his own received him not.

But he came to us too, and as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name. The only race questioned with God is the once-born and the twice-born. That's the only races there are in the sight of Almighty God.

And we are told to be careful about these Canaanites, the wrong company. God wants his people to be different and distinct and separate from the world, not necessarily always physical separation, because as 1 Corinthians 6.10 says, you'd have to leave the world. John 17 in the high priestly prayer of our Lord tells us, we've been saved out of the world, we're still in the world, but we're not of the world.

But we've been saved out of the world to go right back into the world, to win other people out of the world, and that's the only business we have in this world. That's the setup, association but not assimilation. Don't get meshed and merged into the fabric of this age.

Romans 12.2, one of the translations says, don't let this world squeeze you into its mold. That's what's going on today in the professing church. It's being taken over by the world and will end in the Babylon of Revelation and the world church.

We must watch the company we keep. Evil communications corrupt good manners. Birds of a feather flock together.

That woman who wanted to look over a coal mine and see what it was like down there and wearing a white dress was told by the man at the entrance, better not wear that, what's to hinder me? She said, nothing to hinder you from wearing one down, but a lot to hinder you from wearing one back out. And so when you get into this world and yield to it, watch it, watch it. 2 Corinthians 6, 14 to 18 lists all those things we're not to team up with and ends up what contoured, and that's the Latinish word for the musical term in the original for symphony.

What symphony hath Christ and Belial? None. They don't harmonize. Teddy Roosevelt was a great American.

And during World War I, he spoke of German Americans as hyphenated Americans. And he said, if you're an American in something else, you're not an American. He said, this is not a polyglot boarding house over here.

That's a great statement. But we have some hyphenated Christians. We call them worldly Christians, which is a misnomer.

Billy Sunday used to say, you might as well talk about a heavenly devil. A worldly Christian is a hyphenated sort of a character. The friend of the world is the enemy of God.

There's another thorn, and you've already anticipated me, I'm sure, in 2 Corinthians 12, Paul's thorn in the flesh. What was it? I don't know. It might have been yours.

It might have been mine. I'm glad I don't know. Maybe it was eye trouble.

It was an affliction that God wouldn't take away. And the great preacher who had healed others was not delivered himself of whatever plague or infirmity of body, mind, or spirit it was. But he understood it.

He called it the messenger of Satan. I believe in giving the devil his due about this sort of thing. He gloried in infirmity, but he did not glorify the infirmity.

Let's get that thing straight. Jesus said, this woman whom Satan hath bound, that's the right origin. And Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, I meant to visit you folks.

He didn't say, like we preachers do so nicely sometimes, I was providentially detained. He didn't say that. He said the devil hindered me.

And that's what happened. God permits Satan to afflict Job, but don't blame God. Sickness, disease, and death, and all our other thorns are of the devil, if you trace them far enough back.

But God can overrule him and glorify himself, as he did with Lazarus. And as our Lord said to Peter, when he spoke of what death he should, by what death he should glorify God. Sometimes God sharpens the axe on the devil's grindstone.

But it takes this whole world to make the kind of characters God wants to make out of us while he conforms us to the image of his Son. You can't sharpen an axe on a pound of butter. It takes a grindstone.

Some of the greatest saints have made their way through this world with afflicted bodies and tortured minds, and sometimes home problems and financial distress and tragic circumstances, and our little pat answers don't explain it. Sometimes awful things happen to the children of God. I'm getting tired of this new gospel of prosperity I'm hearing.

Be a Christian, you'll be a millionaire. Every Christian a millionaire. I don't buy that.

Make a positive affirmation every morning before breakfast, and you'll be president of the company before you're 40. There was a young man from Kilpican whose nose was as red as a beacon, but by saying it's white 30 times day and night, he cured it and died an archdeacon. I don't believe that sort of business.

I heard something else in my Bible. God didn't say to John the Baptist, Now, John, you've been faithful to me, and I'm going to reward you. I'm going to give you a good old age retirement.

He sat in the jail waiting to have his head chopped off, and another one in the same predicament later on was Paul. God didn't say, Now, we're going to get you a villa out on the Riviera somewhere and let you write your memoirs. It didn't work out that way.

I know Hebrews 11 lists a great many wonderful folks who marched over all obstacles, but right in the middle of it all it says, And others, and some of them were sown asunder, and that's a rough way to leave this world. We have a great Presbyterian preacher down my way, the very first Presbyterian church in Chattanooga, Dr. Ben Haden, a great preacher. The other Sunday I sat there, and I get him on Sunday morning when I'm home and television.

He told something that Donald Gray Barnhouse told him. Dr. Barnhouse was somewhere for a conference, and the young pastor and his wife were expecting their first child, and they had some good-natured bantering through the week as the time drew near. About Friday night, I think it was, Dr. Barnhouse said, The preacher didn't get there, and I knew what that meant, and I went ahead and took

over the meeting.

He said right at the close of my message, I saw him slip in and sit at the back. He came down, and I never saw such a picture of dejection and misery. In all my heart.

And he said, Doctor, we are the parents of a mongoloid child, and my wife doesn't know it yet, and what on earth am I going to say? And the doctor helped him as much as he could. He went to the hospital and told her, and she went to pieces momentarily, but she was a real Christian. She came out of it.

She said, I'm going to call up Mother and tell her that God has given us a mongoloid child. She put the call in, and the switchboard operator was a hard-boiled character. This woman didn't have any faith in Jesus Christ.

She heard it, of course. She got the connection. She knew what had happened.

Now, she said to a friend, we'll see whether this thing works or not. We'll see about this religion business. And when Mother answered, this Mother said, Mama, God has given us a mongoloid child.

And then she went on with her testimony. Next Sunday, the young preacher got up to preach and gave his message. Then came down, gave an invitation, dropped his head.

He didn't really think many folks would come. When he opened his eyes, there stood the telephone operator. She had seen it work.

And whatever it was that could do that, she wanted. Well, sometimes God works it out that way. Paul went from height to depth and then stopped midway on the happy medium.

And the most important thing in your life is not a trip to third heaven, nor even deliverance from a thorn in the flesh if you had it, but learning that God's grace is sufficient when we're weak or strong, when we've exhausted our store of endurance, when our strength fails ere the day is half done, when we reach the end of our hoarded resources, our Father's love has only begun. His love has no limit. His grace has no measure.

His power, no boundary known unto men. For out of his infinite riches in Jesus he giveth and giveth and giveth again. It's worth a thorn in the flesh sometimes to learn that.

And sometimes that's the only way some folks are learning. But there's one other thorn reference, and I think you have already preceded me there. Is there no deliverance from the thorns of creation and the thorns of Canaan and the thorns of the Christian? Yes.

Because I read in Mark 15 and John 19 of a crown of thorns, and when those soldiers jammed it down over the already bleeding head of my Lord, little did they know what it meant, any more than Caiaphas did when he made that strange prophecy when God momentarily restored inspiration to him and he prophesied the gathering of the nations. But that crown of thorns is emblematic and symbolic of all thorns of all time. Thorny creation ruined the sin in an evil society like the Canaanites, and thorns in the flesh that torment the people of God, it all laid on him.

And one day he who wore a crown of thorns will return with a crown of triumph. Our redemption draweth nigh. Creation shall be redeemed.

The original beauty restored. You say, I don't see it now. No, you don't.

It's coming. Some of you could use a new body. I can look at you and tell that the original equipment is showing signs of wear and tear.

Looking at me through your trifocals, you've got your teeth in your pocket, maybe. You know what I think of when I look in the mirror, the verse that hits me? It doth not yet appear what we shall be. But don't get too blue about it if you know the Lord.

You know one thing that sort of amuses me, and it often is a serious word, but you'll understand. When people talk about a terminal ailment, I say, well, bless my soul, we've all got it. We're going to terminate, aren't we, one of these days? And a fellow with a terminal ailment, he may last longer than we do.

What do you mean a terminal ailment? Some things are certain and sure, but beyond that there's something better. Remember that God has an original purpose. The purpose of God, and that's what Romans 8.28 is all about.

Some folks never get any further than we know that all things work together for good, and then some get a little further to them that love God. And they never get through to the end according to His purpose. If you're not in on the purpose, you're not in on anything else.

And His purpose is a book with three chapters, His original purpose, His present purpose, and His future purpose. And we're in the middle of the book, and you don't judge any book but the middle of the book. You can't form a decent opinion of it, and if you get discouraged over the way things are going with you, cheer up, sister, brother.

It's the middle of the book. You can't decide things by that. Keep your eyes on the eastern sky, and I think that ought to be written out with a capital E, the middle eastern sky, for your redemption groweth nigh.

God's going to keep His word. And one of these days, instead of the thorn shall come up the fir tree, and instead of the briar shall come up the myrtle tree, when He comes back. In the meantime, we ought to taste the powers of the age that is to come.

Now, nothing's ever lost if you're in the will of God. Even your tears are in His bottle, Psalm 56a. Did you know God is in the bottling business? A lady down in St. Petersburg, a newspaper writer in one of the papers, a religion writer, she told me that her eyes were damaged some time ago in a TV studio by overexposure to the bright light, and she went to the eye doctor and he said, Do you know what the best eye medicine is? It's tears.

He said no scientist and no doctor has ever been able to come up with an exact match for tears. And you see a lot of things through them that you don't see otherwise. Our Lord says that two sparrows are sold for one farthing, and five sparrows for two farthings.

When you spend two farthings, you get an odd sparrow, and you just throw him in. And yet the Lord says God knows about him too. I got interested in that the other day, the God of the odd sparrow.

If you think you don't amount to much, think of the little girls that lay in the children's hospital, and one of them was little Amy and Annie. And Amy said, I ought to pray, but does God even know I'm here with all these beds full of people? And Annie said, put out your arms and leave them on the outside of the bed,

and then when you pray, make it very plain to God that I'm the little girl with my hands out on the counterpane. Well, that's a precious thing, but does Jesus care? Yes, he does.

And when some people say there's too many beds in the ward and God's got a trillion worlds to look after, he couldn't be bothered with me. If you think God's too great, listen, friend, you're making him too little. If he's infinite, it all depends on that.

If he's infinite, if he knows everything, he's all-powerful and present everywhere, that ends it. He can handle anything, everything, everywhere. And so that's why my Lord came to deal with the thorns of creation and the thorns of Canaan and the thorns of the Christian.

Because of the thorns of Calvary and what they mean, he's taken care of all the thorns. And I know nothing that we could do better than to sing in 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.

And I want you to make this benediction a song right now, one verse of that other precious song. 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, thy Jesus is now.

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