

The Thorns and Thistles of Life

by Vance Havner

The sermon explores the biblical theme of thorns and thistles, highlighting their significance in our lives and the importance of sanctification and separation from the world.

Duration: 29:49

Scripture: Genesis 1:1, Jeremiah 4:3, Matthew 13:7, Romans 12:2, 1 Corinthians 5:10, 2 Corinthians 12:9, Ephesians 3:20

Topics: "Worldliness"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher discusses the concept of divine providence and how it relates to the troubles and challenges that people face in life. He emphasizes that God's love and grace are limitless, and that even in the midst of difficulties, His love is always present. The preacher also acknowledges that the world is not perfect and that there are things like floods, storms, and droughts that cause devastation and suffering. However, he encourages listeners to trust in God's plan and reminds them that there is a future chapter where everything will be made right.

Transcript

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

We've been scratched and irritated and lacerated and torn, and as you grew up in the country, you have wondered why such pesky pests, along with others like mosquitoes, were ever created. Thorns and thistles are symbols of trouble and trial and testing, and some of them have been such a common companion of our life journey. We've had so much adversity, we feel like we could identify with Burr Rabbit.

You remember, Uncle Remus tells us that he was born and bred in a briar patch. The Bible gives us light on the subject and information about thorns and thistles, and their significance, maybe, will help us understand these prickly problems of our existence, and we'll learn what it means to grasp firmly the nettle. That's an old expression, and it's a good one, and it means when you've got a tough problem on your hand, don't monkey with it.

Take hold of it firmly. You'll come nearer settling in than if you just play around about it. That's true with the briars and brambles of our troubled lives.

Now, this Bible emphasis on thorns begins way back, right at the very beginning, practically, in Genesis 3, and we read in the 17th verse that God said to Adam after they had sinned, 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 be the ground from thy faith, 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, or thou return into the ground, for out of it was thou taken, for thus thou art, and unto thus shalt thou return. In the beginning, God put Adam and Eve in the garden, beautiful in every detail. Every prospect was pleasing, and not even man was vile.

It wasn't chaos then, it was cosmos. But the devil came, and God said to Adam, thorns and thistles, that'll be your experience from now on. Not only the visible, physical kind, but all that they represent in trouble, heartache, and pain, and sorrow, and sin.

We're living now in a world that has to contend with briars and thorns, weeds and weather, and bugs and beetles. You try to grow a garden, and you found that out a long time ago. You neglect the battle a day or two, and you've almost lost the war.

The garden reverts to the briars, and children are like that. Bless their hearts. We're like that when we were small.

We have to be trained in sin that our mothers conceive us. They have to be brought up in the way of the Lord. Why do they forget the good so easily and remember the bad? I can think of a couple of things I heard when I was a young student.

I never forgot them, but I never heard them to begin with. It made an indelible impression, and some of you look guilty out there, too, today. You had an experience like that.

The heart is deceitful and desperately wicked. Jeremiah 4.3 says, So not among thorns. A lot of Bible teaching is just like that.

The heart hasn't been prepared, and so you don't get anywhere much. That fallow ground, as I said yesterday, must be broken up. And I read over in Matthew where our Lord explained the parable of the field, the sower.

Verse 7, Some fell among thorns, and the thorns sprung up and choked them. Then he explained it in verse 22, He also that receives seed among the thorns is he that heareth the word, and the care of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and he but it becometh unfruitful. Thorns.

It goes all through the book, you see. Now, I know that the evolutionist, bless his heart, you know, he says that we've been going up all the time. We started with the fetishism, and then we've come through totemism, polytheism, all the way up to monotheism, on our way up to the knowledge of God.

That's what he thinks. You know the old line, once he was a tadpole beginning to begin, then he was a frog with his tail tucked in, then he was a monkey in a banyan tree, now he's a professor with a Ph.D. That's the way it ends up. The Bible started with the knowledge of God, and we've been going down ever since.

Humanity has. It's not evolution, it's devolution. When Burbank took a wild rose and made an American beauty rose out of it, folks said that's evolution.

No, that's restoration back to what it once was. If he makes crab apples fit to eat, that's not evolution, that's restoration back to what they were. And we're living in a world of thorns and thistles, physically, naturally, morally, spiritually.

The old blueprints that God had when he created this world, they're not in effect fully right now because something happened. And now the blueprints include sin and sickness and disease and death and bloodshed and wars and rumors of wars and earthquakes and disasters and floods and tornadoes. I do not believe it was ever in God's original plan.

You see, the purpose of God has three chapters in it. God's original purpose, his present purpose, and his ultimate purpose. And if you've got something in your life this morning that bothered you and you can't figure it out, can't make a bit of sense out of it, don't measure the whole book by the middle chapter.

You don't measure any other book that way. Please remember you're in the middle chapter, whatever happens in your life. There's another one coming, and everything's going to be straightened out then, but not now.

I don't believe that God's original intention was to send floods and tornadoes to kill innocent people and devastate homes. I was down on the Gulf Coast some years ago, right after that awful, that awful storm Cameo came through. One man said, everything I had just disappeared.

I don't know where it went. He said next morning you couldn't hear a bird sing. The folks spoke in whispers.

Everybody was old and tired. It all seems so queer and senseless. Out in Texas they've had a drought, and now everything's almost washed away in some portions of the state.

That's not sensible. If the thing were run on a perfectly orderly basis today, you'd have sunshine when you need it, and rain when you need it. But you see something broke into that picture, and I think we ought to understand that.

The Bible doesn't explain how God began. Don't worry about that. In the beginning God, the way it starts off, and it doesn't explain how evil began.

That is the very beginning of the beginning of it. It tells us about the serpent in the garden. When man listened to the devil instead of to God, God said, all right, you were sweated out.

We've invented machines to cut out the work, and we're headed for a three-day work week, I guess. Want more leisure? Lord help us, we don't know what to do with it when we had it. And the more people try to escape from it, the more they entangle themselves in thorns and thistles.

All kinds, the whole creation, roams and travails in pain together until now, waiting for the manifestation the sons of God. I, as you know, I love to listen to the birds sing and tramp a lot, and I took my walk this morning. The only time to get out of here without running into automobiles, with them running into you, is get up early and take off on this road out to the highway.

Two miles, they tell me, out there and back, and it's worth it. I didn't see but one automobile. What a relief on the way out there at six o'clock this morning.

Coming back, I ran into all the joggers, Lord bless them, puffing and blowing. I don't know, I swear some of them never get out there, let alone get back. You heard about that guy the other day, did you? That dropped dead of a heart attack, jogging home from a health food store.

Well, I like, didn't hear many birds this morning. It's getting hot weather now, and they've got quiet. They had to raise the family, you know, in the casual life.

They're not as musical as they were earlier in the spring, but I did hear my favorite, the wood thrush, and there was a crested flycatcher, and there was a peewee with that mournful little song. A little bit of heartbreak, somebody said, set to music. Somebody said, if you saw a man seven feet tall walking down the road blowing a flute, what would you say? And some fella said, I'd call that highfalutin.

Well, the wood thrush is a highfalutin, he really is. And, but it pays to try to find a little time. I'm not bragging, the trouble about people who get up early, they like to brag about it all the time, and I, that's part of it, you know.

But I do think of old William Lowell, the great saint of God, who said, who am I to lie folded up late of the morning when the farmers are already about their work, and I'm so far behind with my sanctification? That'll do to think about. Now, we could get an argument, I'm sure, on sanctification here if we turned everybody loose, but I think we'll all agree on one thing. We're all behind with our sanctification, and we need to fall on any device we possibly can to assist us in that direction.

After Adam and Eve disobeyed God, he began a new plan of redemption for humanity and the whole creation. He called out the Hebrew nation to be the channel through which the Savior would come, sent them into the promised land, and when they'd conquered much of it, he gave them a warning. First, you have thorns in creation.

The second place, thorns in Canaan. Turn to Numbers 33, and you find there that God said, now you must drive out those people when you get in there. Don't settle down and live with them, and try to have peaceful coexistence.

Can't have it. Verse 55 of Numbers 33, if ye will not drive out the inhabitants of the land from before you, then it shall come to pass that those which ye 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 you have almost the same thing over in the book of Joshua.

There we read in chapter 23, verse 13, God said, if you mix and mingle the wrong way with those people, know for a certainty that the Lord your God will no more drive out. If you will not drive these out, well, he will not drive out any of these nations from before you, either. 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 has given you.

Now, I'm simply saying to this people, you are different kinds of people. You cannot mix and mingle and try to have fellowship with that group of people. You're a chosen people.

You are a peculiar people. You are the people of my choice. And then we read about God's people that we are a royal priesthood, and a holy nation, and a purchased people, a peculiar people.

And God says we are to be careful about our entanglement with this world. He came unto his own, and his own received him not, but as many as received him. To them gave he power to become the sons of God.

That's the only race issue there is in the sight of Almighty God, the once born and the twice born. That's the only two races God sees. Better be careful about which one you belong to.

God wants his people different, distinct. Our Lord said in John 17, I think the greatest chapter on worldliness in the Bible of all places is John 17, the high priestly prayer of our Lord. He said, you have been called out of this world.

You're in the world, but you're not of the world, but you've been called out of this world to go right back into the world to win people out of the world, and that's the only business you've got in this world. Now, if you get that together, you will get located. Now, that doesn't mean that you're not to mix with people here in proper ways.

Paul settled that in 1 Corinthians 5.10. But also remember that he said something else, and he told us that righteousness has no fellowship with unrighteousness, and all that catalog of the antipathies, they don't belong together. And we are in great danger of forgetting that. Romans 12.2 says, don't be squeezed into the mold of this world, and the professing church is being taken over by the world, and will end in the Babylon of Revelation, the world church.

There never has been a culture since Christianity began in which a Christian can feel at home. Now, if you feel at home in this present-day culture, it's because you belong to it. You've located yourself.

Birds of a feather flock together. If that's a crowd you'd rather be with, you're at home here. Why, you certainly are, and we must walk the company we keep.

I don't know how you feel about it, but I have a spell of getting homesick for heaven every once in a while. Some people just say that's not the way we ought to do that. I don't agree with that.

You can be morbid about it, of course, but Paul said he had a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far, and it would take three or four fars to say what the original means there. Far, far, far. Better.

He wanted to go, but he said I'll stay as long as I'm necessary. Well, that's the right attitude. I've got a desire to get on over there.

I don't think there's anything morbid about it at all. I live in motels, and I have to make my way to the dining room past the bar nearly every time, and I can smell it before I ever get there, and then I can hear it after I get a little closer, and what I do have to hear, and the conversation that you walk past, and they're getting ready to eat in there, and I feel like walking up to them and saying, are you going to eat with that mouth? It's a filthy conversation of this age. I've got a hope.

It keeps me going, and I'm like that poor fellow who was seasick, and he lost his breakfast, lost his lunch, and lost his supper, and he was hanging over the rail in a wretched condition. Somebody came along, one of these cheerful souls that always shows up at the wrong time, slapped him on the back, said, Sheriff, said, seasickness never killed anybody, and that fellow said, don't tell me that it's the hope of dying that's

kept me alive this long, but I want to tell you it's the hope of dying that's kept me going this long. I'm looking forward to it, and making the transition.

Oh, I love, I like it here, and this God's given us for all the mess that we're in today. There's still beauty here, and there are many wonderful things, but you know what I mean if you're a child of God, but the Word of God says, now watch it, evil communications corrupt good manners. There Paul quoted from Menander, the great poet, and said, you must watch the company you keep.

I think of that woman who was at the coal mine, never had been in one before, and wanted to look it over, and she was wearing a white dress, and she said to the man at the entrance, I want to go down and look around. He said, better not wear a white dress. She said, what's to hinder me from wearing a white dress? He said, nothing to hinder you from going in wearing one, but a lot to hinder you from coming out wearing one, and that's what happens when you get into sin, the things of this age.

If you mix and mingle with this world, something's going to happen. My favorite president, I suppose, is Theodore Roosevelt, because he was such an American, as well as a lover of the outdoors, and all the rest of it, but during World War I, I remember that when we were having some problems, he said, America is not a polyglot boarding house. He said, if you're an American and something else, you're not an American, and if you're a Christian, try to be something else.

At the same time, there's something wrong there somewhere. They taught the big word for it today. We're trying to have it, but our course is not a collusion course, it's a collision course with this present world.

Then there's another way in which thorns relate. Thorns and creation, thorns and Canaan, thorns and the Christian, and I know you've anticipated me already. You know what I'm going to say next, because Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 12 about his thorn in the flesh.

I don't know what it was, and I'm glad I don't. It could be yours, it could be mine. May have been eye trouble, I don't know.

It was an affliction that God would not take away. He was a great preacher. He was a prisoner who freed other people.

Nearly most of his life he was in trouble, but he was helping other people out of trouble all his days. Whatever plague or infirmity of body, mind, or spirit it was that beset him all his days, he prayed that God take it away, and God didn't. And he called his thorn, now mind you, the messenger of Satan.

I believe in glorying in tribulation, but I don't believe in glorifying the tribulation. The Bible is very clear on that. He said one time, 1 Thessalonians 2.18, I wanted to visit you folks, but I didn't get there.

He didn't say like we preachers do. I was providentially detained. He said the devil hindered me.

And Jesus said about that sick woman, this woman whom Satan hath bound, in its origins all these things go back to the devil. Give the devil the discredit for it, or of the devil, but sometimes they're allowed of God to try us and to glorify himself. Sometimes God sharpens his axe on the devil's grindstone, it looks like.

But it takes the grindstone to sharpen the axe. You can't do it on a cake of butter. You have to have trouble, it seems, to bring us to that sharp edge where we're usable to God's glory.

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 little pet answers just don't clear up the situation. Prayer doesn't remove them sometimes. We have a great preacher down my way, Ben Hayden of Chattanooga, Tennessee, First Presbyterian.

When I'm home, I turn on the TV at 7 30 in the morning to hear that preacher. Very serious man. He told an illustration that I never will forget.

Dr. Barnhouse told him years ago. Barnhouse was holding a conference somewhere in the church with a young preacher who and his wife were expecting their first child, and oh, they were so happy about it. And Barnhouse teased them they had a great week together, the first part of it.

And Barnhouse said one night preacher didn't show up, and I suspected that he was over at the hospital, and so I took the search. And near the close, the preacher slipped in the back and sat down, and his face was a picture of misery. And he came up to me after service, said, doctor, we have become the parents of a mongoloid child, and my wife doesn't know it yet.

How on earth am I going to tell her? Well, the doctor helped him all he could. He told her, and she went to pieces for a few moments, but she got hold of herself. She was a real Christian.

She said, I'm going to call up mother and tell her. And the telephone operator in the hospital was a hardball sinner, and she knew what had happened. She said, okay, we'll see now how these Christians can take it when things break like that.

And when mother answered the other end of the line, this young mother said, mama, God has given us a mongoloid child. And went on to tell, give a wonderful testimony. Next Sunday, the young preacher preached his sermon, gave the invitation, and then stood at the front and dropped his head because he really wasn't expecting many to come.

When the song ceased, he raised his eyes, and there stood the telephone operator, and several nurses, and the gist of it was this. Anything that can make your wife like she is about the trouble that has descended on, we want, we need it. Now, I know that's a circuitous way of explaining the workings of divine providence, but there it is.

That was a thorn. God got glory out of it. And Paul had been to the heights in that chapter, and then went all the way to the depths, and then he came back up to middle ground.

My grace is sufficient. When we've exhausted our store of endurance, when our strength fails, e'er 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. I'm sure some of you know what that means.

It's worth a thorn in the flesh to learn it. If you learn it. But if there's no deliverance now from the thorns of creation, and Canaan, and the Christian, the three C's, what's our hope? Well, there's one more thorn scripture, and you've already anticipated that.

And it's Matthew 22, 29, and Mark 15, 17, and John 19, 2, where they jam that crown of thorns down over the bleeding brow of my Lord. Why thorns? Why didn't they put some sort of a garland around his head? They were making fun, I know it was mockery. They didn't know what they were doing.

They didn't know any more than when he made that strange prediction in John 11, 47, 52. Why thorns? That crown of thorns is emblematic and symbolic of all the thorns of all time. Your thorn, everybody's thorn, the thorns of creation, the thorns of Canaan, the thorns of the Christian.

All sin, and suffering, and disease, and death, and heartbreak, and agony was gathered up. I think, and symbolized in death. My friend James Robinson, the evangelist, sent out to his TV listeners a picture of Christ in the garden, another kind of picture.

I've seen pictures of Jesus in the garden that, frankly, didn't impress me much. I've seen some look like he wasn't suffering much, just suffering a minor inconvenience, it seemed to me. I never was satisfied.

But this one got me. And then I have this friend Ken Hudler in Maryland, who specializes in drawing pictures of the agony of Christ. And they're terrible pictures.

They're frightening. And so is this one. And I hung it up over my desk.

I didn't put a frame around it. I said, I don't want to pretty it up. I want to look at it in all its ugliness, and do some thinking.

There he practically hangs on to a stone. And you can see the sleeping disciples down here, and up in the sky, a vision of the cross. And that's coming up tomorrow.

He's at the bottom rung, is ready to drink the dregs. And no words that you and I can put together can ever begin to gather up what that agony meant. Plenty of people have been crucified.

It wasn't just... and that's awful. That's about the most awful way to leave this world, that you could experience. But he poured out his soul unto death.

Ah, that's it. Now, I can't... I don't have words for that. You don't either.

But there he was. And I said, God help me never to forget price that he paid. I can't gather it up.

I can't lay a hold of it. No, with my poor mind. But one of these days, God, through what was wrought there in the open grave, is going to redeem us, take care of the thorns of creation, the thorns of this evil world and its bad company, thorns of the flesh.

And then Isaiah 55, 13 will say, instead of the thorn shall come up the fir tree, and instead of the briar 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? That's what he came for, because he cared. And he gathered it all up in his suffering, and symbolized it, the thorns.

And it's about time that 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 bright, leading in a calvary. Or we need to sing with old Isaac Watts, see from his head, his hands, his feet, sorrow and love flow mingle down, did e'er such love and sorrow meet, or thorn compose, so rich a crown. And there's one other, you've sung it all your lives, instead of the regular prayer.

We're going to sing just one verse of it, you don't have to look it up, you know it. I love thee because thou hast first loved me, and purchased my pardon from Calvary's tree. I love thee for wearing the thorns on thy brow, if ever I love thee.

I believe you can sing that as you believe me.

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