



HANDLING THE HARSHNESS OF LIFE
II Corinthians 4:7-18
(Rev. Eric S. Ritz and Mr. Lowell Roth)

She had every reason to be bitter. She felt like a ton of bricks had fallen upon her. Life had dealt her more than one harsh circumstance. Though talented, she went unrecognized for years. Prestigious opera circles closed their ranks when she tried to enter. American critics ignored her compelling voice. She was repeatedly rejected for parts for which she easily qualified. It was only after she went to Europe and won the hearts of tough-to-please European audiences that stateside opinion leaders acknowledged her talent.

Not only was her professional life a battle, her personal life has been marked by challenge. She is the mother of two handicapped children, one of whom is severely retarded. Years ago, in order to escape the pace of New York City, she purchased a home on Martha's Vineyard. It burned to the ground two days before she moved in.

Professional rejection. Personal setbacks. Perfect soil for the seeds of bitterness. A receptive field for the roots of resentment. But in this case, anger found no home.

Her friends don't call her bitter; they call her Bubbles.

Beverly Sills. Internationally acclaimed opera singer. Retired director of the New York City Opera.

Her phrases are sugared with laughter. Her face is softened with serenity. Upon interviewing her, Mike Wallace stated that "she is one of the most impressive – if not the most impressive – ladies I've ever interviewed."

How can a person handle such professional rejection, personal trauma, harshness, and still be known as Bubbles? "I choose to be cheerful," she says.

"Years ago I knew I had little or no choice about success, circumstances or even happiness; but I knew I could choose to be cheerful."¹ Instead of being bitter, she got better.

Dr. William Sloane Coffin once shared the story about 3 Jewish rabbis who put God on trial for all of the harshness of life experienced in the concentration camps of

Germany. They found God “guilty as charged.” When the trial ended, one of the rabbis looked at his pocket watch and shouted, “It’s time for prayers.” So the 3 rabbis, who had just condemned God for abandoning them, bowed their heads and prayed to God.

You see, life does terrible things to some people. As a matter of fact, life does difficult things to each and every one of us. Somewhere along the road we have to learn how to deal with harsh facts. Somewhere along the road we are going to have to learn how to handle the rough spots and the detours. We must face disappointments, disrupted plans, and unrealized dreams.

Of all the people on the pages of sacred scriptures who knew what it was to face the harshness of life – it was the Apostle Paul. The lines that best describe Paul’s life of adversity came from the **4th chapter of II Corinthians**. The Revised Standard Version reads: “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed.” But, my favorite translation of that passage is the J. B. Phillips translation. It reads: “We are handicapped on all sides, but we are never frustrated; we are puzzled but never in despair; we are persecuted, but never have to stand it alone; we are knocked down, but we are never knocked out.”

Life is unpredictable. Sometimes you have to settle for a ‘maybe.’ Now the bible understands that. Paul, writing in his Corinthians letters, reminded his readers that their vision was limited. He said it was like looking through a dark glass. All you have is partial vision. The time would come when everything would be clear, and we would know, as even God now knows us. But the time was not yet.

Today, I want to share two considerations as you seek God’s guiding presence for the harshness of life.

FIRST BELIEVE DEEPLY IN THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD.

Years ago, the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr was asked to put into print a prayer he offered one evening at a gathering. That prayer hangs in many households and is often spoken at AA meetings:

**God, grant me the serenity
To accept the things I cannot change;
The courage to change the things I can,
and the wisdom to know the difference.**

In the movie, **O GOD, BOOK TWO**, the late George Burns played the part of God. A little girl asks him why bad things happen. Burns replies that the system simply works that way. He asks her if she has ever seen an up without a down, a front without a back, or a top without a bottom. He then explains that we can’t have one without the other. All sunshine and no rain – equals a desert.

The famous preacher Dr. Leslie Weatherhead told how he handled the harshness of life when during World War II his church location was changed 20 times because it was bombed and destroyed 20 times. He told how during this time a quote from the poet Browning sustained him:

“If I stoop into a dark tremendous
sea of cloud – it is but for a time.
I hold God’s lamp close to my breast,
its splendor sooner or later will pierce the gloom.
I SHALL EMERGE ONE DAY.”²

Believe deeply in the sovereignty of God.

SECONDLY, HARSH MOMENTS ARE NOT THE END OF THE ROAD.

It was the late John Claypool who shared with us the insight that “every exit – is also an entrance.” There are no dead-end experiences for a Christian. We live by faith in God for the future – not the power of fatalism. Yes, we can be puzzled – perplexed, but we do not postpone life. We’ve gone on to fight and live for another day.

The historian Robert K. Mossie said of William of Orange, who became the King of England, that he was possessed of a great skill of surviving every defeat.

It seems that one the French army appeared ready to defeat him and his army at Amsterdam. As he saw the enemy approaching, he used a unique strategy. He ordered the protective dikes to be smashed. As a result, Amsterdam became an island, at which the powerful French army could only look in frustration, for they had not boats with which to achieve the victory that was almost within reach. William did not win the battle, but he saved Amsterdam, and he lived to fight another day. He was struck down - but he did not strike out.³ He was knocked down – but not knocked out.

YES, ATTITUDE WILL DETERMINE YOUR ACTION.

Let me share a story from the life of the great German composer Ludwig van Beethoven. At the height of his musical career he was stricken with a health problem that made him totally deaf. He retreated to a monastery to seek spiritual help. God gave him a new direction. He began to hear new music in his mind.

Writing with great passion – he transferred the silent sounds to musical notes of praise to God. The musical composition was received with great delight. Knowing he was deaf the audience rose to their feet and clapped their hands and stomped their feet. You and I know this great piece of music. Our Opening Hymn, “**Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee**” comes from that composition. It is a hymn of joy – not bitterness. Yes, attitude determines our response – our action.

The great hymn writer Dr. Charles Tindley wrote these words,

“Faith always sees a star of hope
I do not know how long it will be
Or what the future holds for me
But this I know, if Jesus leads me,
I shall get home some day.”

Today, I have invited someone from our church family who has lived out in his personal journey what I have tried to share today. About 4 years ago he experienced a very harsh moment of life. However, wherever our brother goes, he tells people he is “a blessed man.” Lowell, please come forward and complete this sermon. (At this point Lowell Roth of our church came forward and offered these words.)

- It is good to be back with you. I have been in Arizona for the past 2 ½ months.
- For our newest members who don't know me, I have been a member here at EUM since 1963.
- I would like to thank Pastor Eric for the sermon just preached.
- Folks, we should feel blessed that we have a pastor who preaches Bible based sermons.
- And we should feel blessed that we attend a Bible based church.

- Like Pastor Eric shared:
 - Setbacks can be seeds of bitterness, but we must deal with the facts of life.
 - Most of us have experienced adversity or hard times in our lives.
 - In today's lesson we learned Beverly Sills chose to be cheerful. I will share some blessings and some tragedies as well.

- Some of you know about the tragedies in my life and some of you don't.
 - The first major tragedy is when my father passed away when I was 18 years of age.
 - There were 5 siblings younger than myself at home.
 - Dad was sick for several years, bills accumulated.
 - I told my mother I would not go to college, but I would work to help pay off the bills and to help ensure my siblings got a high school education.

- I feel God blessed me in regard to this decision.
 - I was blessed with good managerial jobs.
- During my time at home I prayed that God would provide a Christian girl.
 - And God blessed me with a wonderful wife.
- Great jobs
 - After 35 years at Morgan Corporation I retired. When I retired from Morgan in 2001, I prayed that I wouldn't have to give up any tithing.
 - After 3 days of retirement Superior Walls of America asked me to be their President.
 - I was able to increase my tithing! Another great blessing!!

- Tragedy struck again while I was employed at Superior Walls of America.
 - In June of 2003, I lost my wife, my best friend, to a car accident.
 - To say the least it was a shock
 - Many family and friends helped out.
 - Mike and Penny Burkhardt stayed with me for a week, which I'm ever so grateful for. Mike and Penny are so kind to so many folks, it is like their ministry.
 - Amy Morgan did the grocery shopping for me for a week or so and offered to continue to do so.
 - Christian friends helped me make the adjustment.

- All of a sudden I had to make adjustments.
 - I asked my daughter how to run the washing machine and dryer.
 - All of a sudden I had to do some housework and do grocery shopping.
 - Some things in my life changed 180 degrees.
 - I believe too often we take our spouses for granted.

- How did I get through this tragedy?
 - Great friends
 - The scriptures, prayers
 - The Lord giving me comfort
 - Folks praying for me.
 - Folks are still praying for me, which I appreciate.
 - Ruthy, told me a number of times, she knew where she was going when she passed.
 - I know she is better off and wouldn't want to come back.
 - Ruthy shared a number of times that if something happened to her, she would want me to travel like she and I planned to do.
 - And I know that the Lord wants me to have an abundant life.

- Ruthy, would want me to go and enjoy life and to be an encouragement to others.
 - I want to be of help to people.
 - I want to be an encouragement to people.
 - All of us are ministers of the gospel. We need to find ways to help others.

- I was asked if I was angry with God.
 - No, is my answer. I do question why things like this happen?
 - God has a purpose for everything. Some day we will know.
 - I'm so grateful to God that we had 40 years together.
 - A lot of folks don't make it that long.
 - I would do it all over again.

- Pastor Eric shared:
 - The scriptures reassure that eventually everything will be made clear.
 - Every one of us must face difficult things, disrupted plans, and unrealized dreams.

- The Apostle Paul stated, “We are knocked down but are never knocked out.”
- When people ask how I am, I tell them “I’m a blessed man.”
 - This may not work for everyone but it works for me.
 - This opened many doors and I’m able to encourage and share.
 - Time doesn’t permit to tell you about many conversations.
- II Corinthians 1:3-4 – “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of all compassion, and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in trouble, with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.”
- II Corinthians 12:9 – “My grace is sufficient for you, my power is made perfect in weakness.”
- I claim verses like these. God wants us to have abundant life. He wants us to have the fruits of the spirit, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, self-control.
- In closing I want to say, like Beverly Sills I choose to be cheerful.
- God has a purpose for everything that happens in your life.
- He will give you comfort in all circumstances.
- So you too can comfort others.
- His grace is sufficient for you. No problem is too big for our God.

This sermon was preached at both the 8:30 a.m. and 10:30 a.m. services. It was well received and touched the lives of many that day.

ENDNOTES

¹ Max Lucado, **THE APPLAUSE OF HEAVEN**, Word Publishing, 1990, page 3.

² R. Maurice Boyd, **PERMIT ME VOYAGE**, (Welch Publishing Co, Ontario, Canada, 1989), page 80.

³ Thanks to my colleague, Dr. Thomas Lane Butts, for sharing this illustration.