

#The Struggle Is Real

I try to get my Sunday morning sermon written on Friday, at least a pretty complete version of it, but I struggled all day long trying to decide what to preach. I kept asking the Lord what I needed to say, what do we need to hear? I finally stopped and went on to the hospitals to pray for folks, still thinking about what to say, thinking about the challenges and the struggles our people are facing in the hospital. No easy answers. I finally felt I was to share a word about the challenges of life. (My daughters convinced me to use this title for the sermon.)

I don't need to tell you what you already know, life is a challenge. Life is messy. There is no getting around it. Each day comes at you with challenges, things you'll have to face and overcome. Each challenge is in fact an opportunity for victory, for gain, for growth. They are also opportunities for defeat and loss, depending upon your choice and your response. But each day the challenge is there. It starts with your alarm clock as you accept the challenge of whether you will get up or just pull the covers over your head and surrender. The struggle is real!

Jesus said not to worry about tomorrow. Why? **“Each day has enough trouble of its own.” Matthew 6:34** Really? We are going to be challenged every day! Peter writes, **“Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you.” 1 Peter 4:12** What? Don't be surprised when testing and trials and challenges come to us? That's what he said. Why? Because life is a challenge. Everyday has challenges. No exceptions. Certainly some are more serious than others. Those folks in the hospital that I visited, some are facing life and death situations. Some of us are just facing the challenge of sitting through the service this morning without falling asleep, or trying to get out in time to watch the game. Serious or silly, challenges are there and all of us face them. The struggle is real.

In addition to the daily struggles we face there is an ongoing spiritual challenge. We struggle with the devil, trying to overcome and make righteous choices. We struggle with our own conscience, our own flesh, trying to resist temptation. It's a challenge and we are in a battle. The bible says, **“For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against...the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.” Ephesians 6:12**

Some of you may have seen the movie, The War Room. If you haven't, I would recommend it. It is the truth. We are in a battle. There is an enemy that wants to destroy you,

to demolish your faith and undermine your trust and hope in God. He has come to kill, steal and destroy and he uses all means possible to carry out his plans. The devil doesn't fight fair. The Bible refers to him as cunning, crafty, scheming. He is a deceiver and he has come to deceive you if possible. He challenges God over who will be lord over us. He challenges us over whom we will serve. So here is the challenge:

The challenge: To live a life of faith, to trust in and obey God, regardless of the circumstances. The reality: We will be opposed, by our own flesh and will, by the world and by the devil.

But why do we have to face these challenges? "I thought when I became a Christian I wouldn't have any more challenges or problems. Couldn't God just prevent me from having to struggle with these things?" **Rather than preventing us from facing struggles and challenges, I believe the Lord wants to redeem and re-purpose them for our good and His glory.**

Don't be surprised that life involves a struggle, that sacrifice is required, that extreme effort has to be made. This is what it means to take up our cross and follow Jesus! Jesus said, **"Strive (make every effort) to enter through the narrow door because many will try to enter and will not be able."** Luke 13:24

We are being challenged but don't let the challenges discourage you. I'll say it again, the Lord wants to redeem and re-purpose every challenge for our good and his glory. The truth is, it is the unchallenged life that remains unproductive, unfruitful. It is the challenge that motivates and moves us to action. It is the challenge that produces passion, that prompts us to fight the good fight of faith, to persevere and never give up. It is the challenge that causes us to rise to the occasion, to discipline ourselves and pursue excellence in our walk of faith, to overcome. The challenge may just turn out to be a necessary thing, even a good thing in our life.

Let me share a couple of passages of scripture and then I want to make some observations I felt the Lord drop into my heart. Turn with me to **Deuteronomy 7:1**. The Lord is speaking to the Israelites about how they will drive out the nations from the land he is giving them. **"When the Lord your God brings you into the land you are entering to possess and drives out before you many nations – seven nations larger and stronger than you – and when the Lord your God has delivered them over to you and you have defeated them, then you must**

destroy them totally.” Deuteronomy 7:1

Notice how that works? The Lord will drive out the nations and deliver them over to you, but you will defeat them and you must destroy them. God is doing it, but he is doing it through the Israelites. There is the challenge. The Israelites will have to face enemies and fight battles, but God has assured them of victory. And here is the lesson for us. God will be faithful. He assures us of ultimate victory, but we will have to face challenges and fight battles as well.

Now look at 7:22. **“The Lord your God will drive out those nations before you, little by little. You will not be allowed to eliminate them all at once, or the wild animals will multiply around you. But the Lord your God will deliver them over to you...”Deuteronomy 7:22**

They weren't going to be able to eliminate them all at once. God had promised them ultimate victory, but there is a process involved in this deliverance. It was going to happen over a period of time. The challenge would remain before them and they would have to continue to fight the good fight. They would have to continue to be obedient and trust the Lord and his timing. Why? He said the wild animals would multiply around them. If God did it, it would clear the land faster than they could claim it, clear it, possess it, plow it. They would have to trust God's timing.

Now look with me at Judges 3:1-2. Years had gone by, the nations had been driven out little by little. But look at this passage. **“These are the nations the Lord left to test all those Israelites who had not experienced any of the wars in Canaan (he did this only to teach warfare to the descendants of the Israelites who had not had previous battle experience).”** Speaking of these nations the Bible says, **“They were left to test the Israelites to see whether they would obey the Lord's commands, which he had given their forefathers through Moses.” Judges 3:1-4.**

I would have been thinking, “Why are we having to go through this? I thought we were supposed to be enjoying peace in this land of promise. Now we have to fight. Why didn't they get rid of all these people when they first entered the promised land? Why did we have to do this a little at a time?” But there was a purpose in this ongoing challenge. The younger generation would have to learn to fight so they could keep the land their fathers had secured for

them. They would have to continually depend upon the Lord. The challenge would require them to continue to call upon God and ask for his help and wisdom. **There was purpose in the challenge!**

Life is a challenge but don't let that throw you. **Challenges are maturing, proving, empowering, clarifying, perfecting events.** The Bible says to count it all joy when we face a challenge because, **“You know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature, and complete, not lacking anything.” James 1:2-4.**

It looks to me like God leaves a few nations - a few challenges and obstacles in our path as well so we can rise to the occasion, so we can accept the challenge and learn the art of spiritual warfare and grow and be perfected and made complete in the process. There is a purpose in our challenges.

But I also know that challenges can be overwhelming at times. We look at them and think, “I simply can't do this anymore. How can I do this? How can I endure this?” Let me share three things with you that you need to understand during the challenge.

This challenge is about more than you can see right now. We want to run when the challenge intensifies because we can't see beyond the test. We can't see the growth and perfecting that is occurring in the process. All we can see is that we are tired and weary and we don't feel like facing another challenge. But remember: It is always about more than you can see. Don't quit. There is something else involved here.

Go down the list of the great people of faith in the Bible. It was always about more than they could see at the moment. Abraham was promised an heir but the delay seemed forever. He thought it was just about having a son, but it was about more than having an heir, it was about the Messiah being born through his lineage. It was about teaching us to have faith so we too could be declared righteous.

Joseph thought it was about the wickedness of his brothers, betraying him and selling him as a slave. He thought it was about life's unfairness, being forgotten and left in a prison, but it was about so much more than he could see. It was about preserving the people of Israel through the famine. It wasn't just about him and his brothers and family, it was about the fulfilling of God's plan for his people. It was about saving a nation. It is always about more than you can

see at the moment.

Israel was challenged and they are thinking it is just about them and the property they are trying to possess. It was about much more than that land, it was about a covenant, it was about a kingdom and a Messiah that would come and save us from our sins. It was about so much more than what they could see at that moment.

You are facing a challenge right now and thinking about calling it quits. The marriage isn't working out, the life you've chosen isn't what you thought it would be and you just want some peace, some happiness. I understand. But it is about more than you can see at this moment. There is always more at stake. Eternity is at stake.

You see, there is an enemy that is ultimately bidding for your eternal soul. And because of that, **The stakes are higher than you thought.** It isn't just about you and the moment, it is about trusting God and obeying God for the long haul. It is about remaining faithful now because eternity is ahead. Trust me when I tell you what you are dealing with is about more than you can see right now. I know you are tired of the challenge, but the stakes are higher than you think so don't give up. Obey God and his word. Heaven is cheering for you and counting on you.

The challenge effects more people than you think. You are facing this incredible challenge. The devil is bidding for your soul. You know God has called you to obedience. You know what the Bible says, but you are so tempted to go your own way. You are thinking, "What difference does it really make? After all, it's my life. I should be able to live it the way I choose. I deserve to be happy. I'm not hurting anyone else. Besides, I am just so tired of this battle." I understand, but trust me again when I tell you, your choices effect more people than you think. Your family is watching. Your friends and co-workers are watching. Your children are watching. What is the lesson you wanted to teach your children, your grandchildren? And what is the lesson your choice now is teaching them or will teach them?

The truth is there are folks you don't even know that are watching your life, folks that are effected by your choices for God and righteousness. Your choices effect more people than you think and it effects them for eternity.

The challenge is before you. Your decision effects so many people. What will you do? Be faithful, trust God as he redeems the challenge and honors the choice you make as you obey

Him. There is more at stake than you realize. Finally, keep in mind:

God always makes a way. If you trust him, if you call upon him, if you obey him, God will make a way. He will make a way where there seems to be no way. He will carry you, lift you, deliver you, lead you and guide you.

The challenge may be great, the test may be difficult, but hear the word of the Lord. **“No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.” 1 Cor. 10:13.**

God is faithful and because he is faithful, he will provide a way for you, for me, for all of us. He will redeem and re-purpose every challenge so if you will trust him and obey him, he will work it for your good and for his glory.

You are facing a challenge. Maybe it’s the biggest challenge you’ve ever faced. In the face of the challenge this morning, affirm some things:

Affirm your faith in God. “I’m not going to quit, so help me God.” Affirm your faith in God and declare your intention to obey his word, to keep living for him in obedience.

Affirm that you will journey with God’s people. Look around. You aren’t alone this morning. There are people here who have faced challenges just like you and they have kept on going, just like you can and will. Keep walking with God’s people.

Affirm that you are empowered by the Holy Spirit. If Christ is your Savior and Lord, then the same Spirit that raised Christ from the dead dwells in you and he is greater than the spirit of the world or the devil or any other thing. He is “able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine according to his power that is at work within us.” Ephesians 3:20. You will overcome!

Affirm that you are relying upon His grace. The Lord says, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Paul writes in response to that, “...when I am weak, then I am strong.” 2 Cor. 12:8, 10. You can do this! You will overcome!

Affirm that through Christ, you can handle every challenge. Whatever it is, don’t quit, don’t give up. Face the challenge as the conqueror you are in Christ. **“I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” Philippians 4:13**

You are going to make it. The challenges you face give you opportunity for great

victory, to bring great honor to Christ, to provide a strong witness to those around you. Get ready to grow through your challenges as God redeems and re-purposes them for your good and his glory. And remember, in the midst of this challenge you're in – it's about more than you can see right now. It's bigger than you realize, there is more at stake, your choice will effect more people than you think so remain faithful and obey God. Trust and don't give up. Remember, God will make a way!