

The Challenge of 2019

Here we are on the first Sunday of 2019. I always like the idea of a new year. It's a clean slate, a new page, anything is possible. We start off the year with bright hope, with new resolutions for how we are going to change and make new strides, take new steps toward being better versions of ourselves. Of course, that was last week. Tomorrow is the 7th of January, everyone is back to work and back to school. Life is back to normal and we don't have time for being better people, we're too busy trying to be at least the same people we were last year.

That may not sound too helpful or hopeful for a new year's sermon. To be honest, I've struggled a bit with a word the Lord gave me. I often ask the Lord for a word for the new year. We've had a year of healing, hope, laughter and peace. A year of progress, possibility. A year of planting, preparing, a year of harvest. This year I heard in my spirit the word challenge! Oh man, I didn't like the sound of that. I don't want any challenges. It really rattled me. What's going to happen? What are we going to face? I thought, "Lord, it's not your nature to frighten me so is this word from you?" I asked the Lord for clarity and began to give thought to the word and what it might mean for me and for all of us in 2019. As I did, I began to feel better, more confident. Allow me to "challenge" you with a few thoughts this morning about the challenge of 2019.

The first thing I realized is that challenges aren't bad things because, **An unchallenged life is an unproductive life.** We could ask God for an unchallenged year and hope to not have any problems of any kind, just lay on the couch and watch more Hallmark movies. But what is the benefit? What's the point? Besides, you already know how the movie is going to end, every, single, time. You might not face any challenges in 2019 but you won't see any growth or progress in your life either, not without challenges.

Growth requires challenge. In every area of our lives. My brother played tennis in high school. He practiced by hitting a tennis ball against the front wall of Gracetone Pottery in Muskogee. There is benefit in hitting a tennis ball against a wall but the wall doesn't move, it doesn't think, it doesn't have an offensive or defensive strategy. If you want to grow as a tennis player, it requires the challenge of another player, someone more advanced than a wall. It's that way in every athletic endeavor. No one says, "He's really good if there is no opponent. He can almost score every time!" Growth requires a challenge. It requires opposition. For muscles to grow and become stronger there must be opposition, challenge. Challenge isn't a bad thing because it can cause us to change, to adapt, to endeavor, to grow, to try harder and hopefully to

succeed. The bible says, **“Consider it pure joy whenever you face trials of many kinds, 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** None of us are happy about the challenges, but understand the potential, the opportunity for growth, for maturity. Face the challenges of 2019 with pure joy because growth is coming!

As a noun the word challenge is used in a military setting as a demand for identification. “The sentry gave the challenge.” “Halt, who goes there?” You identify yourself. We find out who we are as we face challenges in life. God designed us so challenges would provide self-discovery and growth as well as providing discovery of who God is and how faithful he is. We learn about life. ourselves and about God’s character through the challenges we encounter.

As a verb challenge means to object or to question. It is a summons to a fight, a contest. “I challenge you to a duel, to a contest, a game.” Life itself is a challenge. It’s a battle, a race, a contest. That’s what Paul was talking about when he said he “fought the good fight, finished the race and kept the faith.” He crossed the finish line and won! With Christ and the Holy Spirit’s power and presence at work in us, we will meet the challenges of 2019 and we will be more than conquerors, more than overcomers, we will be victorious in Christ. We will cross the finish line and win, through Christ Jesus, but believe me, we won’t be unopposed or unchallenged.

As we meet the challenges of 2019, be aware that much is at stake. I’m not just talking about trying to lose a few pounds, although that’s important, but I’m talking about being aware of the spiritual challenges we may face. Challenges to compromise, challenges to go with our gut rather than going with the clear word of God, going with the crowd rather than standing alone with Jesus, taking the easy way rather than taking up our cross and following Jesus. There will be challenges and keep in mind, we’re talking about eternity. The stakes are high. It matters!

The writer of Proverbs exhorts us, **“Above all else, guard your heart for it is the wellspring of life. Put away perversity from your mouth; keep corrupt talk far from your lips. Let your eyes look straight ahead, fix your gaze directly before you. Make level paths for your feet and take only ways that are firm. Do not swerve to the right or the left; keep your foot from evil.” Proverbs 4:23-27** There’s a challenge! Guard your heart. Fix your gaze! Make level paths for your feet and take only ways that are certain and firm. Stop making bad choices and going down the wrong road. Don’t swerve from the path of obedience to God and his word!

Challenges are going to come but you don't have to make them worse by wrong choices. Challenges are going to come but you don't have to let them defeat you. Discipline and training is called for in our walk with God so we can rise up to meet the challenge. Run and train and discipline your body, get healthy but don't neglect your spiritual life. Paul writes, **“For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come.” 1 Timothy 4:8** Prepare to meet the challenge of 2019 and win!

Bro. McQueen used to say “if you haven't had your Gethsemane, just wait, you will.” Some people objected to that. They felt it wasn't a positive confession. It was predicting something bad was going to happen. In my opinion it wasn't predicting something bad, it was just stating a truth born of experience. Everyone has challenges. I don't care what your faith confession is, bad stuff still happens to people that are living on planet earth. But bad things happening don't have to destroy us. What does the bible say? **“A righteous man may have many troubles, but the Lord delivers him from them all.” Psalm 34:19** We will all face challenges in 2019, but don't despair. Be encouraged. Here are some things I know for sure.

We will face challenges but God's grace is greater! The Apostle Paul speaks of a thorn in his flesh, what he calls a messenger of Satan that was sent to torment him. He was facing a challenge wouldn't you say? Paul said, “Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me.” Three times he pleaded but immediate deliverance or relief didn't come. What did come was this word of assurance. Paul writes, **“But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’” 2 Corinthians 12:9**

Challenges will come but in those times of testing when you feel weak and helpless, don't despair. God's all sufficient grace, God's grace that is more than enough will be at work in you, in your life, in your circumstances and his power will be manifested in your weakness. At the moment when we think “I can't,” God by his grace in us says “I Am and I can!” His grace is sufficient for you in every moment and every circumstance of your life.

You know what I've said all these years and it's still true in 2019. **Life isn't fair but God is always faithful!** 2019 will present some challenges that won't seem fair. It already has for people in our church, for people we love. The challenges of life don't seem fair, but God is the one who stands faithfully beside us in every challenge. He is the one who shows his power in our weakness. Paul reminds us in Romans 8, **“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”**

Romans 8:28 Life isn't fair but God is at work. The Psalmist said **"The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit."** **Psalm 34:18.** He declared, **"God is our refuge and strength, an ever present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea."** **Psalm 46:1-2** Life isn't fair, but God is faithfully present in every circumstance, near to us, our refuge and our strength, working in our behalf! You can count on God being faithful in 2019.

Pain you encounter in the challenge is birth pain. Something is being born in you or birthed through you. I said at the beginning that an unchallenged life is an unproductive life. Something is being produced in you, through you. There will be pain with that challenge, but there is blessing coming! Something new is about to happen, something new is being born.

We've just come through Advent. Think about Mary. Just a young girl planning to get married and have a quiet life. She's hoping for no challenges for a while when suddenly an angel appears and says **"Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."** Luke tells us, **"Mary was greatly troubled at his words..."** **Luke 1:28-29**

"Highly favored. The Lord is with you". And now her whole life, her whole world is about to be turned upside down. You are blessed and highly favored but you are going to face a challenge. You're going to give birth to a son, but Joseph isn't going to believe this at first, there'll be a challenge. Your son will grow but will be spoken against and a sword will pierce your soul as well. Listen to me, **Blessing and challenge go together.** If you want to be blessed, you'll have to face some challenges. Can you handle it? Remember this, God is a redeemer and he acts in redemptive ways. He will redeem every pain, every trouble and trial. He is going to birth something in you. He'll take you through this challenge into a place of blessing, a place where he can use you and bless others, a place of rejoicing and giving thanks. He is going to teach you and show you things you never would have seen or known before. It's a challenge and it's painful, but that pain is going to result in the birth of something wonderful. Trust me and more importantly, trust Him!

Someone needs to hear this word. You'll face challenges this year that will cause things to shift and change in your life and your circumstances. You know why? Because God is getting you ready to give birth to something. Something is about to be born through you that will bring blessing to God's kingdom, his church, to others in your life. That challenge may be painful, but it's going to result in something wonderful. What's God going to birth in you or through you

this year? You may not realize you're pregnant with God's idea, with his gift, his blessing. Remember challenge and blessing go together. Don't panic because of the challenges!

The challenge of 2019 needs to be set in perspective. **Any challenge you encounter can't compare to the glory God will reveal as you trust him.** We face challenges that cause us to lose perspective. "This is awful. This is the worst thing ever. Nothing good can come from this. God's given up on me. The bottom's fallen out. I can't make it!" We think this because we are focused on the challenge and not on the outcome, what God is producing, what God is preparing. Paul writes, **"I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us."** **Romans 8:18.** N.T. Wright's translation reads, **"The sufferings we go through in the present time are not worth putting in the scale alongside the glory that is going to be unveiled for us."** God can use that challenge to prepare you, equip you, complete you, to produce something glorious in you and in your life. This challenge may not be easy, but tell yourself, "I'm not quitting, I'm not giving up because I know what's ahead. This can't compare to the glory that is going to be revealed in my life as I faithfully trust and obey him!"

While this world may be shaken by challenges in 2019 remember: We are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken. The writer of Hebrews declares, **"Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire."** **Hebrews 12:28-29**

Earlier in that passage he indicates that everything that can be shaken will be shaken. The things of this earth, even things and traditions we hold dear, may be shaken, may be taken from us, but what remains are those eternal things that cannot be shaken. Kingdom things. The challenge for some of us this year may be to simply remember who is really and always in charge and in control. Trust him. Hold on to the stuff that can't be shaken. Hold on to the things that will remain, the eternal things. Our kingdom and our life should be built on the stuff we will still have after the tornado, the earthquake, the fire has taken everything away. Our faith, our family, our integrity. You get it. Everything holds together in him. Keep worshiping and trusting in the one who holds it all together, even if the world is shaking under our feet.

Whatever the challenge, remember: "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." **Philippians 4:13** I have no idea what challenges any of us will face in the coming year, but I know where our strength comes from. I know who has promised to be with us every moment of 2019. I know that when I am weak his strength and power will be revealed

in and through me. I know whatever the challenge it doesn't compare to the glory that's going to be revealed. I know regardless of how big the challenge, God is going to work it for good. He is going to redeem it, give birth to something wonderful through it, turn it around. I won't quit or give up because I know I can do all things through Christ who gives me the strength. Keep going. He is at work in you and you can do it!

Finally, the best advice I can give you if you face challenges in 2019, the key to meeting every challenge is to stay close to Jesus. **Intimate relationship and fellowship with God will see you through every challenge of 2019!** How do we have that intimate relationship and fellowship? The only way I know to do it is to spend time with him through prayer and reading His word. Pray. Seek his face. Spend time in worship. Talk to him, fellowship with him. Rely on him. Trust him. Read and study God's word and learn to put it into practice in your life. Obey him. Seek him. Listen to him. Follow him. You can meet the challenges of 2019 if you are walking close to Jesus!