

Sermon for Sunday, May 18, 1975, by Andrew A. Jumper, D. D., Pastor
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"WHEN YOUR BACK WHEELS ARE OFF"

II Cor. 12:1-10

Text: "I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me." II Cor. 12:9b

There is not a single person present here this morning who does not have at least one problem of some sort or another. You have a problem. Whatever it may be, you have a concern. It may be the problem of growing old and accepting the reality that you are aging. It may be the problem of facing up to job limitations and job abilities and accepting the fact that you will never achieve what you hoped you would. For a young person, it may be the problem of passing a course or something even more important--which date to accept. The problem may be as profound as trying to make a shaky marriage work or as simple as deciding which dress to wear to the Friday night party. So, the question that faces all of us is not whether we will have problems. The fact is, all of us have problems and some of us have many different types of problems. As time goes on and life changes, we have new problems that come to us, even as we solve old ones. The real question that faces us is how are we going to deal with our problems when they come.

A bad way to respond to our problems is to use them as an excuse for doing nothing. You see, quite often our real problem is not so much the outward circumstances of life. Rather, our real problem is our inner resources, our inner response to those outward circumstances. When we are overwhelmed by our problems, our failure is because we are already defeated inside. We are beaten because of something within us that refuses to see and to face reality as it really is. We are like the man who was driving his wagon down a country road. The horses were straining in the harness, and he was cracking his whip over them and they were laboring under the burden--their sides wet with sweat as they tried to pull the wagon. He stopped the wagon beside a farmer standing along side the road, and said with some irritation, "How much longer does this hill last?" The farmer studied him for a moment and said, "There's no hill. You have lost your back wheels!"

So often that is our problem. Our back wheels are off. Our inner attitudes and internal resources are simply overwhelmed in the face of difficult problems. You see, there is a profound difference between the man who quits simply because circumstances are difficult and the man who, looking within himself and drawing on his own inner resources, does his very best in the face of the very worst. See how it works! Francis Parkman, the great American historian, is a good example. During a great part of his life, he suffered so acutely that he could only work in 15 minute spans. His eyesight was so poor, that he could write only a few large words on a sheet of paper. He was tortured by a major digestive trouble; he had rheumatism and agonizing headaches. Yet, in the face of this physical wretchedness, he drew upon inner resources and during his lifetime, in spite of his difficulties, wrote nearly twenty magnificent volumes of history.

Life is such that problems cannot be avoided. There is no way that you can protect yourself from problems. Our real problem is knowing, then, how to respond to trouble when it comes. To know how to draw upon inner resources to meet them. Here was St. Paul, for example, who suffered a serious physical problem. We don't know what

it was. However, there are some clues in scripture that give us an idea of what it might have been. We think, because of these clues that he may have had a serious problem called Oriental Red Eye. It was disfiguring, it was extremely painful, it caused loss of vision. The reason we think it may have been this is because in one of his letters, Paul says, "See with what big letters I write you." As though he were writing large because he could not see well. And then, when he wrote to the Galatians, he speaks of his infirmity of the flesh and he said, "You received me as an angel of God, for I bear you record that if it had been possible, you would have plucked out your own eyes and given them to me." So this makes us think this was the problem that St. Paul had. So, in spite of a painful and disfiguring disease, this man stands out as one of the greatest figures on the pages of human history other than Jesus Christ himself. From his own inner resources, drawing from within, having the hidden powers in his inner being, he did his best in the face of the very worst, and he became great for Christ's sake.

Now, if you and I can look at St. Paul and discover some clues as to how he did this, would it not be helpful to us in handling problems in our lives, to know how he tapped in to hidden power. Let's see if we can discover how it works. Notice first that St. Paul says of his problem, "I was given a sharp pain in my body which came as Satan's messenger to bruise me." Now if you have an infection in your body your doctor has to find the source of it to cure it. If a water pipe is losing water, before you can correct it, you have to find where the leak is. If a tire is flat, before you can fix it, you have to find out where the puncture is. So the first thing in dealing with a problem is recognizing where the source is. You see, Paul does not see himself as the victim of blind fate or chance or fortune. He is not the victim of bad luck. No, he understands in a deeply theological sense that his problem is the result of sin in human life. He calls his problem "Satan's messenger." When our back wheels are off, the first lesson we need to learn in dealing with our problems is that they are, in a deeply theological sense, the result of sin in human life, the consequence of brokenness between us and God. The Bible tells us that man is fallen, and with him fell his whole creation. You and I, therefore, lived in a broken world; a world separated from God and that the consequence of this is sin, pain, sickness, death, trouble. These are not God's will for us. Instead, they are the consequence of brokenness in your life and mine.

Now, you know, the fact is, it would really be easy if we could attribute our problems to God. If we did that, we wouldn't bear any responsibility for it and we wouldn't have to deal with them. We could simply say, "It's God's will." We could say, "I can't teach, God didn't give me the ability." We could say, "I can't give, God didn't make me rich." We could say, "People will have to accept me as I am, ugly and mean as I am, because it is God's fault; He made me that way." We could say, "I can't help it if I'm in trouble. God made me that way. It is God's fault." So, if my marriage is failing or my grades are poor, or I'm not getting ahead, I can blame it on God.

So, the first thing we learn from St. Paul in dealing with our problems is a profound theological truth. The truth that tragedies and ills, the pains, and the hurts, and the failures of life--these are not God's will for us! They are the result of sin in human life. Part of my time as a pastor is to counsel with people whose lives have simply blown up in their faces--jobs lost, marriages gone stale, emotions run wild, heartbreak and unhappiness, tragedy, sadness and disappointment. They all come

with one question in their hearts, "Is this God's will for me?" And the answer is always, "NO. NO." Who would want any part of a God who would so cruelly subject us to misery? No, our problems are the result of sin in human existence. As St. Paul put it, they are "Satan's messengers."

The second clue we can get from St. Paul in responding to problems, is that even though his back wheels were off, he saw some advantage in it. He saw that though God did not give him his problems, God brought good out of it. As he put it, "This was to save me from being unduly elated." In other words, it helped me become a better human being. Now it helps in facing up to problems if we can take some profit out of the pain. Teddy Roosevelt once insisted on finishing a political speech in spite of the fact that he had a revolver bullet in his breast from the gun of a would-be assassin. He got so hardheaded because he once took a beating as a terrified boy. He made up his mind, after he got beat up, he was going to learn how to box and to shoot and play tough games with the best of them. He took some profit out of the pain of that beating. Lewis Bisch, the doctor-author of the book "Be Glad You're Neurotic," tells us that sickness can be turned into an asset. He says, "Suffering is a cleansing fire that chars away most of the meanness and restlessness and triviality of so-called 'health.'" So, in the midst of the worst that life can do to us, we need to look for the profit in the pain. Some of you know the poet Milton who once said, "Who best can suffer, best can do." He demonstrated this in his own life, for after he was blind, he wrote his magnificent piece, "Paradise Lost."

So, first St. Paul recognized where his problems came from. Secondly, he looked for some profit in them. The third thing he did, when he found his back wheels were off was he opened his life to God. Now, this is the exciting thing about Pentecost. The Bible tells us that as the people gathered in prayer, opening their lives to God, that "Dunamis," dynamite--power from God--entered into them and exploded in their lives. As they opened themselves to God, his power began to flow through them. This is something we really need today. I had a friend who was a member of a former church who came to me to talk one day and said, "I have talked to my doctor I talked to my boss, I have talked to my friends, and I have even talked to my wife. And now, I have come to talk to you." Well, it is nice to know where you stand on the "where-to-go-when-you-need-help list." But, actually, I was not on the bottom of the list, God was. He had not opened his life to the divine possibility of God working through him. Dr. Alexis Carrel says, "Prayer is a force as real as terrestrial gravity. As a physician I have seen men, after all other therapy had failed, lifted out of disease and melancholy by the serene effort of prayer." You know, isn't it exciting to think that a power that is of God is available when you and I open our lives to Him, that through that power can come and explode into our every need and every area of our lives.

Then, the fourth thing that we can learn from St. Paul is, when we do this--when we open our lives to God--He responds to our weakness. He touches us at the point where our wheels are off. Paul tells us that God said to him, "Paul, Paul, my grace is all you need; power comes to its full strength in weakness." That's an incredible thought. Power, God's power, comes to its full strength at my weakest point. You know, God didn't take away Paul's problem, for God rarely removes the pain and the sorrow from our lives. He rarely lifts the burdens of life from our shoulders. Yet, as Paul turned to God at the very point of his need, at his weakest place, God reached down and touched Paul with strength. Out of that experience that gave power to his weakness,

Paul cried out, "I shall therefore prefer to find my joy and my pride in the very things that are my weaknesses; and then the power of Christ will come and rest upon me."

Do you want God's power in your life this morning? Then turn to Him at the point where your wheels are off, at the point of your greatest weakness, and open your life to God. At that point His power is made perfect in your weakness.

We need to learn to lay our burdens at the feet of God when our back wheels are off. You see, it is there at the point of our need, at the point of our weakness, that God reaches down to touch us with strength and power. He may not remove the hurt--he usually doesn't--but he will give us strength and power to do our best in the face of the worst.

Several years ago at Montreat, I was working with the Youth Conference. We had about 1,400 young people there, and I was one of the leaders. I had some adult counselors working with me, and one of them told me of an incident that happened. A young girl came to him as he was standing near the door of one of the coffeehouses we had for the young people. "Would you go inside," she said, "and find some girl my age to talk to me?" "Could I help you?" asked the counselor. "No," she replied. "I just got a phone call from home. My mother called to tell me that our daddy has left us. I need to talk to somebody my own age who can understand what I am feeling." Later, when the counselor was telling me about it, I was concerned and I said to him, "Don't you think she needed some mature guidance?" And he grinned at me and said, "No, the first person to walk through that door was a girl from my own church. I guess God had it all planned. You see, this summer, her father left them, too. One of the things that happened out of that heartbreaking experience was that she found Jesus Christ. I knew she would know what to do." I don't know the details of how it worked out, but in my heart I know what happened. As she came looking for help, opening her life to God, at the point of her deep hurt, God reached down and touched her with strength and power at the point where her wheels were off. God's power was made perfect in her weakness.

Are your back wheels off this morning? Well, that's what sin does to our lives. But it is right there, at the point of our deepest need, God comes to touch us, when we open our lives to him.