

August 15, 2010 by Steve Brandon



# What I Learned On My Summer Vacation

## Proverbs 24:32

- 1. God's Glory is to be Experienced.**
- 2. We can Easily Grow Dull.**
- 3. Ignorance of the Law is no Excuse.**
- 4. Suffering Is a Part of the Christian Life.**
- 5. Suffering Makes the Church Strong.**

For the past few years, my parents have spent the cold winter months of the Midwest in Arizona. While there, they have attended East Valley Bible Church. Tom Shrader is the senior pastor of that church. From time to time, he has preached a sermon entitled, "What I Learned on My Summer Vacation." In these messages, he has simply taken some lessons that he learned on his summer vacation and passed them along to his congregation. Such is the sort of message that I want to preach this morning.

As most of you know, our family is coming off a summer vacation. We have been gone the past three weeks. We had a great trip. We drove out to California to see Yvonne's parents, stopping along the way to see some great sights. We spent our first night in the Badlands of South Dakota, seeing Mount Rushmore the next day. We tried to make it to Yellowstone for our next night, but didn't quite make it, so we spent the night in a campground a few hours outside the park. We spent the next two days and nights in Yellowstone. Then, we made it out to Bend, Oregon, where a friend of ours is a music pastor at a church. We spent Saturday and Sunday with him.

After this, we spent a few days in a place in Modoc county, where Yvonne's parents own a piece of property way out in the middle of nowhere. We then settled down at Yvonne's parent's place for a few days before spending a few days with some old friends of ours that we try to see each summer. Finally, we blitzed back to Illinois, making it home by Wednesday evening.

As a family, we are very thankful to be able to take such a trip. So, thank you for making this opportunity available to us. Our time away really ministered to me and to my family. It was a time of great refreshment and fun. It built great memories for our children, which, I trust, they will remember long after Yvonne and I are gone. Hopefully, it will be a refueling time for us as we face this next year of ministry to all of you.

Now, my message this morning is going to be much different than normal. Usually, we open our Bibles and turn to a text. We spend our time right there in the passage, exposing its meaning and application to our lives. We've been doing this for years. We'll get back into the book of Hebrews next week. But, this morning is going to be a bit different. Rather than focusing upon one text, we'll turn to several texts. Rather than focusing upon one main topic, we'll sort of do a hodge-podge of different texts this morning. But, my hope and prayer is that God will speak to you this morning from His word.

Let's begin by looking at Proverbs 24:32, which says, ...

Proverbs 24:32

When I saw, I reflected upon it; I looked, and received instruction.

Now, I want for you to notice here, that the writer isn't looking at something in the Bible and learning from the Scriptures. He isn't saying, "I read this chapter and this verse and learned some things." Rather, he's looking at life and receiving instruction as he observed something. The context tells you what he saw.

Proverbs 24:30-34

I passed by the field of the sluggard  
And by the vineyard of the man lacking sense,  
And behold, it was completely overgrown with thistles;  
Its surface was covered with nettles,  
And its stone wall was broken down.  
When I saw, I reflected upon it;  
I looked, and received instruction.  
"A little sleep, a little slumber,  
A little folding of the hands to rest,"  
Then your poverty will come as a robber  
And your want like an armed man.

I trust you see what's happening here in verse 32. The writer observed the field of the sluggard and noticed a few things. He noticed how overgrown the vineyard was with weeds. He noticed how uncared for the field was. He noticed how poor the crop would be. Then, he drew

his conclusion: Poverty will come upon the man who fails to work. That's the point of verse 34.

But, verse 32--where I have directed your attention this morning--is describing the process of observing life and learning from it. In this case, the object lesson has to do with the sluggard. With my message this morning, I want to take from my life experiences over the past few weeks and share them with you. I want to tell you what I saw; I want to explain to you what I learned as I reflected upon it; I want for you to embrace what I have received as instruction. I want to encourage you to live this way. Observe what God is doing in your life. Learn from it, and share it with others.

The idea for this message came to me when we were in Yellowstone. We arrived in the park Wednesday afternoon. We settled our campsite and took off to explore the park along the Grand Loop Road. We stopped at a place near the "Mud Volcano." We happened to be walking along one of the boardwalks near some of the geysers. It was a beautiful sight. The earth was spewing forth water from the ground. The trees were in full bloom. There were wild flowers along the way.

As we passed by the way, we passed by some trees that had the bark worn away on parts of their trunks. I saw them, but didn't take much notice of them. As we walked along, we happened upon a group that was coming the opposite way. They happened to be with a Park Ranger, who was giving a Ranger Talk. So, we stopped to listen, and then proceed back down the same boardwalk from which we had come. Upon walking, someone asked about the way the bark on the trees was worn away. The Park Ranger said that the marks were made by the Bison. In the winter, their coats get really long and shaggy. Come springtime, they begin getting too hot, so they rub themselves against the trees to scrape off the fur from their bodies. The sap of the pine tree helps to remove the fur from their sides, and in the process, the trees are worn down.

Upon mentioning this, I saw a whole bunch of trees that were worn out in the same manner. All it took was a bit of explanation. Now, I can see it. I can see these sorts of trees all over the place, where once I didn't notice them at all. With such knowledge, the beautiful landscape became even more enjoyable, as I was able to see things that I never saw before. The Park Ranger opened our eyes to see what we had been seeing, but had not seen.

When the Park Ranger said these things, I said to Yvonne and the kids, "That's like a pastor's job. I need to open God's word to show what's there, so that people can see God more fully. And, seeing Him more fully, they can enjoy Him more deeply." Such is the spirit of my message this morning. I want to share with you some things that I experienced while on vacation. My aim is that you might come to see God better and enjoy Him more.

Here's my first point:

#### 1. God's Glory is to be Experienced

Turn with me in your Bibles to Psalm 19. This is a great Psalm that tells of the glory of God displayed in the creation.

Psalm 19:1-6

The heavens are telling of the glory of God;  
And their expanse is declaring the work of His hands.  
Day to day pours forth speech,  
And night to night reveals knowledge.  
There is no speech, nor are there words;  
Their voice is not heard.  
Their line has gone out through all the earth,  
And their utterances to the end of the world  
In them He has placed a tent for the sun,  
Which is as a bridegroom coming out of his chamber;  
It rejoices as a strong man to run his course.  
Its rising is from one end of the heavens,  
And its circuit to the other end of them;  
And there is nothing hidden from its heat.

These verses tell us of the glories of the creation. You look at the heavens and they are telling you of the glory of God. You consider how vast the heavens are and you are being informed of the work of God (verse 1). This takes place day after day, and night after night. In the day, the sun proclaims the glory of God (verse 2). In the night, the moon and the stars proclaim the glory of God (verse 2). Now, it does all of this proclamation without words. The creation of God is a bit like music, whose tones and melodies transcend language. So also does the creation proclaim the glory of God to all nations, regardless of the language spoken (verse 3). In fact, this is the point of verse 4: "Their line has gone out through all the earth, and their utterances to the end of the world." There is no place hidden from this wordless preacher!

That's Paul's point in Romans 1:20, "Since the creation of the world [God's] invisible attributes, [namely] His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse." No one alive can claim, "God hasn't made Himself known to me." Indeed, He has! To every living creature, God has made Himself known. I love the way that Job puts it, ...

Job 12:7-10

But now ask the beasts, and let them teach you;  
And the birds of the heavens, and let them tell you.  
Or speak to the earth, and let it teach you;  
And let the fish of the sea declare to you.  
Who among all these does not know

That the hand of the LORD has done this,  
In whose hand is the life of every living thing,  
And the breath of all mankind?

Would the beasts be able to speak (as they do in Narnia), they would all tell you of who brought the disaster upon Job. The LORD God brought it. All the beasts of the field can tell you this. They all know who made them and who controls the affairs of men.

Now, often these things are applied to the field of apologetics. Every person on the planet is accountable to God, because, He is made Himself known. So, every person is without excuse. Indeed, this is a great application. But, I want to apply them in a different way (which is thoroughly Biblical).

God didn't place Himself as a witness in creation merely to hold men accountable in the day of judgment. Rather, God made His creation glorious, so that we might feel the power of God and turn our feelings of awe and wonder into worship of Him who made it all! Or, as I have put it in my first point, "God's Glory is to be Experienced."

This is what we experienced on our vacation. We experienced God's glory. I can't tell you how many times we rounded a corner or came over a hill, only to have everyone in the car say, "Wow!!" Often, the request would arise, "Take a picture of that!" Regarding the beauty of the mountains and hills and streams and valleys, you can't take a bad picture.

But, here's the thing that I learned. God's glory is in the creation not because the Scripture says it, but because the creation says it. See, it's not the Scriptures that tell you of God's glory in creation. Rather, it's the creation itself that tells you of God's glory. The scriptures are merely reporters of the facts.

Regarding God's glory, I can show you picture after picture after picture of the beauties of creation. And you may well be impressed. But, it's not like being there, and experiencing it yourself. See, pictures don't do God's glory justice. There are times in our vacation when we stepped outside and looked at the stars and said, "Wow!"

Think of a picture of the stars. Does such a picture do justice to God's glory? I know that many of you have been outside and have seen the stars. I ask you, "Does a picture of the stars do justice to the glory of God seen in the stars?" No, you have to experience it. And in experiencing it, it ought to draw you in to worship the LORD. Psalm 8:1 says, "O LORD, our Lord, How majestic is Your name in all the earth, who have displayed Your splendor above the heavens."

And so, I encourage you, church family, get someplace where you can experience the glory of God. It's not sufficient to hear about the glory of God, any more than it's sufficient merely to look at a picture of the stars. No, you need to experience it. You may not be able to take a trip to California, like we did. But, you may be able to take a drive out into the country, and away from the lights and look up into the heavens and experience God's glory. Bask in it! Take it in!

That's one thing that I learned on my summer vacation: God's Glory is to be Experienced. Second, ...  
2. We can Easily Grow Dull

I learned this lesson twice. The first was in our travels, and the second was in church.

On our way to California, we stopped in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, which has to be one of the most beautiful places on earth. At Jackson Hole, there is a one-year Bible college, appropriately called "Jackson Hole Bible College." We are thinking of sending two of our children, Carissa and SR, to spend a year there. It's a year of Bible training, with an emphasis upon studying God's creation. Throughout the year, field trips are taken to the Grand Canyon, Mount Saint Helens, Yellowstone, and other places. While there, they study the creation of God and are presented with evidence that supports a young-earth.

Anyway, we stepped on campus (which is really like a camp), and overshadowing the campus is a grand mountain. The sights are beautiful. While we were marveling at the creation, one of the staff members of the college said, "Yes, it is amazing that we have the opportunity to live here and see this every day. But, sadly, we often get used to the marvelous scenery and don't even notice it any more." We can easily grow dull to the marvels around us.

The same point was made the by the pastor of the church we often attend in California. He told us of how he grew up, some 50 feet from some railroad tracks. When the train would come by his house, the entire house would shake and rattle. The windows would make quite a noise as they were shaken by the train. Those in the house would have to shout to each other to communicate. Phone conversations stopped for a minute as the train passed. At first, he told us, it was alarming and down-right scary. But, then it was merely annoying. After a while, it was hardly noticed any more. It was a part of the routine of life.

When his friends would come over for dinner and would experience the trauma of the train, they would be scared stiff at the noise and shaking. But, Tony (the pastor) would merely carry on as if all were normal. "Please pass the butter." Tony had grown dull to the noise.

We had a similar experience in moving to Rockford. The first few nights that we slept in our home, we were awakened at 2 in the morning by the UPS jets flying overhead into the Rockford airport each night. But, soon, we were able to sleep through the night. And now, I hardly notice them any more. But, this is my point. "We can Easily Grow Dull." It can be a good thing and it can be a bad thing. It's a good thing that we aren't awakened every night to the sound of jets flying into Rockford. But, it's a bad thing if we grow dull to the spiritual realities of all that is ours in Christ Jesus. And yet we can grow dull, can't we? We hear it so often, we read of it so often that we can easily grow dull to the tremendous blessings that we have in Jesus.

When driving out west, the reason why we all said, "Wow!!" was because we don't normally see mountains and canyons and salt-flats. All we see is corn and soybeans. Now, the best way not to grow dull is to continually remind yourself of the contrast of what you have in Christ with what life would be like without Him.

I want for you to think for a moment. What would it be like if you had none of the benefits of Jesus in your life? What if you didn't have forgiveness of sins? What if you didn't have redemption through His blood? What if you had no hope? What if you had no power to conquer sin? What if you knew no grace? What if God justified by works and not by faith alone? What if you had to face God on your own merits? After thinking of this, perhaps your love and awe for Christ will grow as you see the great blessings that are ours in Him!

Turn with me to Ephesians, chapter 2. This is a great passage that speaks about our salvation. But, I find it very insightful how it is that Paul speaks about our salvation. He often paints the bad news before he gets to the good news. Ephesians 2 is a familiar passage. We were here a few months ago. But, it bears repeating again.

Ephesians 2:1-7

And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest. But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

In an effort to show His readers the depth of the blessings that have come to us in Christ, Paul first reminded those in Ephesus of what they were like without Christ. They were dead in their sins (verse 1). They were followers of the devil (verse 2). They were under the wrath of God (verse 3). It was then that the blessings of God's salvation came, free and rich and abounding in power and glory. When can see the contrast, you can say, "Wow!!"

Ephesians 2:8-10

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.

These are some of the greatest verses in all of the Bible, explaining how our salvation has come to be. We could reflect here, but we need to move on. Notice in verse 11 that Paul does the same thing again. He reminds his readers of life without Christ, so that life with Christ can be seen against the backdrop of life without Christ.

Ephesians 2:11-18

Therefore remember that formerly you, the Gentiles in the flesh, who are called "Uncircumcision" by the so-called "Circumcision," which is performed in the flesh by human hands - remember that you were at that time separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, who made both groups into one and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, which is the Law of commandments contained in ordinances, so that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, thus establishing peace, and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity. And he came and preached peace to you who were far away, and peace to those who were near; for through Him we both have our access in one Spirit to the Father.

Apart from Christ, we were despised by the circumcision (verse 11). Apart from Christ, we had no part in God's people (verse 12). Apart from Christ, we were "strangers to the covenants" (verse 12). Apart from Christ, we had no promises (verse 12). Apart from Christ, we had no hope (verse 12). Apart from Christ, we were without God! (verse 12). Apart from Christ, we were "far off" (verse 13). But, everything has changed in Jesus! By faith, we have been brought near to God (verse 13). By faith, we have been united with the people of God (verse 14). By faith, we have come into the body (verse 16). By faith, we have access "in one Spirit to the Father" (verse 18).

Oh, that we would be gripped with the glories that are ours in Christ! Let's always remember us where we were without Him.

### **3. Ignorance of the Law is no Excuse**

As we drove out to California, we went through Illinois and Wisconsin. We saw a lot of "Speed Limit 65" signs. As we reached Minnesota, we saw a lot of "Speed Limit 70" signs. As we reached South Dakota, we saw a lot of "Speed Limit 75" signs. By the time we reached California, we saw a lot of "Speed Limit 70" signs again. One day, while driving through California, I didn't see the signs that said: "Speed Limit - TRUCKS over 4 tons, MOTOR HOMES, CAMPERs, TRAILERS 55". And so, I met a police officer. Yeah, I got my first speeding ticket ... ever. I was doing close to 70 in a 55, forgetting that I had a trailer behind my van.

Now, I could come up with a bunch of excuses. I really didn't see the sign. There aren't signs like that in Illinois. There were other trailers going even faster than I was. I was going about the speed of all the other cars. But, none of my excuses would be valid. I was still a law-breaker. According to the law, I deserved a ticket. And I got one. I'll pay the fine for breaking the law.

Ignorance is no excuse. And when it comes to the law of God, there are no excuses for ignorance either. The reason is because we all know enough. I should have seen the sign. Turn over to Romans, chapter 2. In the first three chapters of Romans, Paul is putting forth the doctrine of sin. He's showing how all in the world are guilty before God. In chapter 2, he comes to address the Gentile, who is ignorant of God's law, never having heard it and never having been taught it. And yet, their ignorance is no excuse, because God has given everyone a conscience. Look at verse 14, ...

Romans 2:14-16

For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them, on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus.

Paul is here describing the godless man, who often naturally follows the law. They are kind and helpful and courteous. They have a love for their family. They have a respect for authority. They don't do these things because of something that they learned in church; they may have never attended church. They do them because God has given them a conscience to know what's right and what's wrong. And as they do "good things," they show that they have enough of the law upon their hearts, because God has given them a conscience (verse 15). And they do enough wrong that their conscience will accuse them of the wrong that they have done.

And when the day of judgment comes, when all will give account to Jesus Christ for their sins, nobody on that day will be able to claim ignorance. Sure, perhaps they never knew "The Torah." Perhaps they never knew fully the story of Adam, Noah, and Abraham. Perhaps they never knew about Saul or David or Solomon. Perhaps they never knew about Jesus. They knew enough. God made it clear to them through their conscience. They knew enough to acknowledge that they were sinful, and thereby, lawbreakers, as they have broken the law found in their conscience. And they will pay for their sins and need to cry out to God!

That's why they need to have the gospel: that they would know of forgiveness in Jesus. People won't stand before God with a valid excuse of why they didn't repent and believe. All will stand before God as guilty sinners. It is clear as could be, ...

Romans 3:9-12

What then? Are we better than they? Not at all; for we have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin; as it is written, "There is none righteous, not even one; there is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God; all have turned aside, together they have become useless; there is none who does good, there is not even one.

These verses scope the entire world, Jews and Gentiles like (verse 9). Nobody will ever escape God's wrath because of ignorance, because all are sinners and all know that we are sinners. But, the good news comes in verse 21.

Romans 3:21-24

But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus;

Here is the glory of the gospel! God's righteousness comes to us apart from the law (verse 21). That is, we aren't justified by what we do or don't do. Rather, we are justified "by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus." That is, we believe in Christ and God reckons our faith as righteousness (Rom. 4:5).

Let's move on, ...

#### 4. Suffering Is a Part of the Christian Life

During our family worship times on our vacation, we focused our hearts upon 2 Timothy. So turn with me to 2 Timothy, chapter 1. As a family, we memorized the first chapter together. Each day, we read the chapter. Then, we would review what we had memorized. Then, we memorized the next verse. Then, we would think about it and discuss it. The result is this: 2 Timothy 1 has been placed upon our hearts during this vacation.

2 Timothy 1

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, according to the promise of life in Christ Jesus, to Timothy, my beloved son: Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.

I thank God, whom I serve with a clear conscience the way my forefathers did, as I constantly remember you in my prayers night and day, longing to see you, even as I recall your tears, so that I may be filled with joy. For I am mindful of the sincere faith within you, which first dwelt in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice, and I am sure that it is in you as well. For this reason I remind you to kindle afresh the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands. For God has not given us a spirit of timidity, but of power and love and discipline.

Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord or of me His prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel according to the power of God, who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity, but now has been revealed by the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the

gospel, for which I was appointed a preacher and an apostle and a teacher.

For this reason I also suffer these things, but I am not ashamed; for I know whom I have believed and I am convinced that He is able to guard what I have entrusted to Him until that day. Retain the standard of sound words which you have heard from me, in the faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. Guard, through the Holy Spirit who dwells in us, the treasure which has been entrusted to you.

You are aware of the fact that all who are in Asia turned away from me, among whom are Phygelus and Hermogenes. The Lord grant mercy to the house of Onesiphorus, for he often refreshed me and was not ashamed of my chains; but when he was in Rome, he eagerly searched for me and found me--the Lord grant to him to find mercy from the Lord on that day--and you know very well what services he rendered at Ephesus.

Three weeks ago, I didn't have these verses memorized. But, as a family, we learned them on vacation. You can do this too (with a bit of work).

Anyway, here's one of the great themes that arise from 2 Timothy. Suffering Is a Part of the Christian Life Look at verse 8, ...

2 Timothy 1:8

Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord or of me His prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel according to the power of God,

The call to Timothy was a call to suffer. It was a call to embrace the suffering. Jesus suffered. That was His "testimony." Jesus came and lived a righteous life among us. And yet, His life was filled with difficulties and sorrows. Ultimately, Jesus suffered upon the cross and died for our sins. Paul suffered. As he was writing this epistle, he was writing as a prisoner, who was in prison, precisely because he believed in Christ and was bold in proclaiming it. In verses 9 and 10, Paul outlines the gospel: that it's all of God, and it's not according to our works. Paul was appointed to preach this (verse 11). Paul said (in verse 12) "for this reason I also suffer these things." God has called me with a holy calling. God has shown me the gospel, that I'm saved by His own purpose and grace. God has appointed me to be a preacher and an apostle and a teacher.

Life, for Paul was difficult. He stood alone. In verse 15, he wrote, "All who are in Asia turned away from me." Paul's call to Timothy was to "join with him in suffering" (verse 8). Timothy wasn't to be "timid," but was to continue forth in the power and love and discipline that God had given to him (verse 7). Timothy wasn't to be "ashamed" that suffering, because suffering is a part of the Christian life.

Our leader, the Lord, Jesus Christ suffered. As you reflect upon this, you realize that there were some who were ashamed at the testimony of Jesus. They were ashamed of a suffering Savior. People don't want suffering. They want conquering. They want power. They want victory! As so, when Paul was in prison, people didn't associate with him. People didn't come to his help. Because, for them, their "faith" was all about victory and conquering, not suffering and death and dying.

But suffering is a part of the Christian life. 2 Timothy 3:12 says, "Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." Likewise, Acts 14:22 tells us, "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God." As a family, it has been helpful for us to think about these things and talk about these things, which leads to my final point.

## 5. Suffering Makes the Church Strong

While we were in Oregon, we had an opportunity to mix with a friend of ours. His wife is from Russia, and her parents happened to be in town from Russia on their summer vacation. We happened to spend some time with them.

Now, think about what our friend's in-laws have experienced. They were believers during the former Soviet regime, before Communism fell in Russia. They knew of great persecution. And I thought, "What a great opportunity. What a great opportunity for my children to hear from those who suffered in the church." And so, I gathered my children (particularly my two oldest), and I asked one question, that took about 30 minutes to answer. I said, "Can you tell us a bit about the state of the church before the Soviet Union fell and contrast it with the church today?"

Our new Russian friend told us of her church growing up. It was a small church. Her father was the pastor of the church. The thing that stands out most to her was how eager the Christians were to gather and worship the Lord. They didn't have very much. But, they had each other and they had the Lord.

Then, she told us of the building that they built to be used as a church. In order to build it, they had to get permission from the local government, which they had. The people of the church poured great effort into building the church themselves. And when it was erected, the city officials came and said that it was illegal. One day they came with bulldozers and knocked it down.

Those were difficult days. But, it created a stir in the community and people were interested in hearing about Jesus. Still, the church was small, as few were willing to profess their faith in Christ. And now, fast forward to today. She said that the churches in Russia are bigger today. But, in general, the people are much less eager to gather together.

She said that in the past, it was clear who was a Christian. Nobody would profess to be a Christian, unless they were willing to give all for Christ. But, now, it's more difficult to know the genuine believer from the false believer. As there is less resistance in the society, there are many more professing Christians, because there is no price to pay. As a result, the church isn't as strong as it used to be. The zeal isn't what

it used to be. Easy times have made the church weak. So, know this, when suffering comes, it makes the church strong.

One passage that illustrates this comes from James 1.

James 1:2-4

Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

The picture here is so against our nature. We don't like suffering. We prefer to have peace in our lives. And yet, there is something about the trials that come in our lives that make us stronger. James actually says that we will be "perfect," when the trials in our lives come to completion. What is true on an individual level is also true on the corporate level. Suffering will make the church strong.

I want to close with a final word to all of us. I recently received a letter from Grace To You, which is the organization that broadcasts the sermons of John MacArthur. This letter addressed the current state of our economy, which is very obviously in poor condition. Then, it gave a good perspective on how the church will fare in such an economy. May it help focus our hearts upon what's true in these difficult days.

You don't have to be a trained economist to realize these are extremely tough times. Financial uncertainty permeates our culture from Wall Street to Main Street--and it affects every one of us in some way or another.

Wages are tight. Unemployment is soaring. Students graduating with advanced degrees from the best colleges are having trouble getting their careers started, because no one is hiring. Personal debt levels are through the roof. Relentless news of foreclosures and falling home values dominates the housing market. People have less discretionary income than at any time in recent memory. Anxiety is high.

Taxes are high, too. And they will soon go much higher.

That's because the federal government is also accumulating debt at a record pace. And the U.S. is not alone. Most national governments worldwide are similarly mired in debt. Greece is literally bankrupt, and the bailout for Greece will likely cause years of recession and possibly more bankruptcies in the European Union. Many economists say the United States is headed for similar insolvency. Some say we're already there.

That did not stop the United States government from offering bailouts to Wall Street, failing banks, and the foundering automobile industry. In return for the bailouts, the government in effect takes control of those industries. Washington will soon take oversight of healthcare as well.

On top of all that, a recent series of disasters, ranging from Hurricane Katrina in 2005 to this year's oil rig disaster in the Gulf of Mexico, have added immensely to the financial burdens of the federal government--while utterly ruining many private businesses.

Meanwhile, the size of the U.S. government and the massive web of government regulations have grown exponentially in the decade since September 11. While Washington is steadily taking control of business and industry, our courts and legislators are putting more limitations on individual freedoms. We've seen the erosion of religious freedom and aggressive attempts to stifle God and His Word in the public arena. And there is no end in sight for most of those trends.

How did things get so bleak? How did our economy sink so quickly after the boom years of the Internet and the explosive (and lucrative) growth of so much high-tech industry?

The problem cannot be blamed entirely on the uncontrolled growth and undisciplined tax-and-spend policies of big government. Those things are surely factors. But another key factor was unscrupulous greed--especially among the captains of industry, the heads of banking, and the movers and shakers of Wall Street. During the years when they were making massive profits, they took for themselves enormous bonuses and obscene salaries, rarely sharing their companies' profits with hardworking, rank-and-file employees.

Those nine-to-five workers' salaries grew at a much slower rate than industry profits. And to satisfy *their* greed, many of them borrowed more than they could afford to repay--borrowing money controlled by the oligarchies that have profited so immensely from their labor in the first place. So as the gap between the very wealthy and the middle class grew wider, the rich profited again off people whose wages they had stinted.

All of that sets the stage for more recession; bigger, more intrusive government; further economic turmoil; and possibly even social unrest. Similar times in the past have led to revolutions and sweeping changes in the political landscape.

If that sounds very grim, and if you think I'm about to deliver a prophecy of doom, nothing could be further from what is actually on my heart. *I'm excited to see what God is going to do in His church in the days and years to come.* We may be facing difficult times, but **the church flourishes in hard times**, and none of those crises are reasons for individual Christians to fear. our God is still sovereign.

Indeed, the church flourishes in hard times. The times we are facing are difficult indeed. The future looks bleak. But, remember, suffering makes the church strong.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on August 18, 2010 by Steve Brandon.  
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