

Growing up on the farm, my Mom always had rose bushes. Not just one or two but more like 40-50 planted between the two retaining walls near the house. As a kid, what I remember most about those rose bushes was that they were ball magnets. Softballs, baseballs, basket balls, they all loved the roses. And with every ball that entered, came the challenge to retrieve it with the least amount of pain. Although our text isn't talking about actual thorns, those rose bushes remind us that life has both thorns and rose petals.

I. Life on this side of heaven is filled with both rose petals and thorns. A. But why do we face thorns? 1. We face them to keep us humble. Paul says of himself, "So to keep me from being too elated by the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me." Paul didn't ask for it, but, in God's wisdom, it was given to keep him humble. God still uses thorns for the same reason. Our thorns may be different, but the purpose is the same. God needs to keep us humble lest we become proud and boastful, lest we think we can do what only God can do. We may think, "I don't need anyone. I'll be fine on my own." But God always knows best.

2. We face thorns to remind us of our dependence on God. As Paul's ministry grew rapidly, wouldn't it have been easy for Paul to depend on himself, to think it was all about him, that he was the reason for all those new believers? In our world of technology, a world where it looks like we are in control, that we're making all the advancements, it's easy for us to depend on ourselves, to think, "Look at me, world! Look what I have done!" In a world that loves to recognize our accomplishments, that loves to give credit where credit isn't actually due, our God uses thorns to bring us to our senses, to remind us that life is all about God, not all about us.

3. We face thorns to lead us to repentance. What did Jesus send the disciples out to do? To impress others? He sent them out to preach repentance, to lead people back to Christ. That message hasn't changed. The bottom line is still the same, "Repent and believe the Gospel." That's your mission; that's my mission. That's our mission. Until we repent, we have no need for God and if we have no need for God, we have no need for faith or eternal life. Thorns lead us and others to repent, to stand before God and say, "I have failed, Lord, and I need Your forgiveness." It may take thorns to get us there, but it's where we need to arrive.

B. As we arrive, what does God provide in our rose petal moments? 1. He provides forgiveness. To the early Church, what was most important? Was it the building, the social aspect, their status in the church? What was most important, most sought after, most treasured was the assurance of forgiveness, that their guilt had been relieved. When we strip away all the outward stuff, all the positions, roles, and personal accomplishments, when we finally arrive at the heart of the church of today, we still find forgiveness. After hundreds of years, forgiveness still remains the core, the central focus of the church. Without it, we have no church at all.

2. In our rose petal moments, God provides evidence of His grace. What is this grace of God? It's God doing the unthinkable for the undeserving in an incredible way. God does the unthinkable every day by claiming us as part of His family. As He offers us His love, as He gently leads us on our mission, God gives evidence of His grace. Every day and in every situation, He says to us, "My grace is sufficient.

My grace is all you need.” We may object and insist that we need more, but, the bottom line is that His grace, His love, His compassion is all we need because everything else He offers comes as a direct response to His grace.

3. In our rose petal moments, He provides strength in our weakness. How many times have you said to yourself, “I can’t? I can’t take one more step? I can’t endure one more heartache? I can’t do x, y or z?” It’s so easy to say, “I can’t,” but “I can’t” gets us nowhere. Worst of all, it interrupts God’s mission for us. Maybe we want to quit, but God says, “My power is most evident in your weakest moments. Press on and I will show you and the world around you that I am God and I can do the impossible!” As much as we dislike weakness, as much as we struggle to be strong, to be tough, to be invincible, God waits for us to lean on Him, to believe He has a better plan.

4. In our rose petal moments, God reminds us that nothing is impossible with God. Before we misinterpret that statement, we need to realize that the impossible must first be what God knows is best. Yes, God can do anything, but we need to understand that anything must be God’s anything. Anything we face, no matter the magnitude, the complexity, the pain, the whatever, God can fix, leads us through, bring us to the other side, enable us to endure, and provide strength we didn’t know was possible. Life may dish out some intense thorns, but God continues to say, “I know what you are facing. I will give you the strength or remove the thorn. Trust Me!”

5. In our our rose petal moments, He provides the ability to be content with whatever. When it seems like we keep sticking our hands in the rose bushes to retrieve our basketball or baseball, when we get tired of one thorn after another poking and prodding, it’s easy for us to find a new definition of contentment, to say, “I’ll be content when.” But, God, being the amazing God He is, says, “Be content now. Be content when the thorns are poking you because if you can be content then, you will be content in the true sense of the word at any other moment!” Content whenever, surrounded by whatever. It’s possible and God is waiting to provide it.

6. In our rose petal moments, He gives us the energy to continue on our mission. How often did the disciples think nothing was happening? It’s easy to think, “The disciples had it easy because amazing things were happening all the time,” but what about all the hours that aren’t recorded? In their worst moments, God gave them the strength to continue. In those times when we struggle to move forward, which seem to occur more frequently than those times of greatness, God says, “Remember your mission. Focus on that mission. Move forward on My mission. Continue on that mission and I will bless you with strength beyond human capabilities.”

7. Whether you’ve stuck your hand in the rose bushes far too many times or avoided them all together, life has its thorns. Yet above and beyond those thorns, are those times of immense joy, times we call our “rose petal moments.” Amen.