When Your A String Breaks

King asserts that God’s grace enables one to turn liabilities into opportunities. Noting that “we as a people have the handicap of oppression and injustice,” King draws inspiration from the resilience of slaves, whose “bottomless vitality” transformed the fatigue of despair into the buoyancy of hope.

II Cor 12:9 And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee; for my strength is made perfect in weakness.

I would like to start my sermon this morning by referring to a violin—that gently beautiful instrument that pours forth cosmically melodious music.

This is life—to have your A string snap and finish on three strings.

III The A string may break in some childhood experience:
   a Some parents do not understand the critical importance of the emotional experiences of childhood, and the child grows up with suspicion, distrust, fear anxiety and vindictiveness. His spiritual problem will be to deal with this.
   b Or here is a man who in youth had all the natural ambitions of young manhood for success but who now recognizes that he will not arrive at the desired goal. Again and again he has stumped on the gas, but the speed is not in him. Nature did not equip him with eight cylinders or with six—only four, and those none to good.

B The A string may break in some physical hardship, cripple for life.

C The A string may break in being inflicted with the loneliness of standing up in a great cause.

D The A string may break as a result of personal relations—Here is a life that wanted love and missed it. Here is a young couple that wanted a beautiful marriage. Here is a family where a child was greeted as a blessing, but became an inward agony—epilepsy—eye trouble.

Paul experience “My grace is sufficient.”

V How do we deal with this? Where is the grace that is sufficient to us?
   A We must honestly confront the experience of having our A string snap. Don’t run from it. Place your handicap dangerously at the forfront of your mind and stare dangerously at it. “How may I transform this liability into an asset.”
   B Another important way to deal with the problem is to develop the capacity

---

1. King wrote the first page of this outline on the verso of a 3 November 1959 letter ripped in half. Although missing the sender’s name, the text indicates the author was Thomas H. Randall. King wrote the last two pages of the sermon on a sheet of Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) stationery that was torn in half.
2. Cf. 2 Corinthians 12:9
3. King’s sermon file contained his handwritten note about the violinist Ole Bull, who continued to play when his A string broke (King, When Your A String Breaks, Sermon notes, 1959)
to make our limitations our opportunities. We must take our handicaps and use them as the raw material out of which we mold and create something meaningful. Transform the dungeon of handicap into a haven of creativity.

1. The boy in Jamaica
2. Roosevelt
3. Lincoln
4. Beethoven, Milton, Handel

However severely our handicaps we can always make a spiritual contribution to the world. We as a people have the handicap of oppression and injustice.

1. Call the rol of Negroes
2. Slavery—they survived.
3. Their bottomless vitality transformed the fatigue of despair into the buoyancy of hope

D. The plane trip—No wind of adversity can stop him. No storm of failure can overwhelm him.

E. Lagston Hughes

F. The meaning of grace

AD. CSKC Sermon file, folder 82, "Making It in on Broken Pieces."

---

4. King may refer to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s ability to pursue a successful political career despite his paralysis.
5. In his sermon “Overcoming an Inferiority Complex,” King observed that a young Abraham Lincoln had been “one of the most discouraged men that ever lived” until he gave his life to the cause of anti-slavery (King, “Overcoming an Inferiority Complex,” 14 July 1957, p. 314 in this volume).
6. King may refer to Ludwig van Beethoven’s deafness and the blindness of John Milton and George Frederic Handel. King also referred to Milton’s blindness in Unfulfilled Hopes, Sermon Delivered at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, 5 April 1959, p. 363 in this volume.
7. In a sermon filed in the same folder as this document, King listed Booker T. Washington, Roland Hayes, and Mary McLeod Bethune as African Americans who “demonstrate to us that we can make it in on broken pieces” (King, “Making It in on Broken Pieces,” 4 August 1965).
8. King may be referring to Langston Hughes’s 1922 poem “Mother to Son,” as he does in the prepared text of the 1957 speech, “The Montgomery Story” (King, “The Montgomery Story,” Address at 47th Annual NAACP convention, 27 June 1956, in Papers 3:10). He preceded the poem with the comment, “We must continue to move on in the face of every obstacle.”