

Threads of Hope Sewing Devotion 11

Last month we looked at a simple sewing tool that most of us use every time we sit down to sew—the seam ripper. We talked about how the Bible tells us that there are times to rend, or rip, things. Today we are going to look at another simple sewing tool that is spoken about in the Scripture: the needle.

The needle is one of the earliest tools known to man. Early needles were pieces of sharp bone, often bird bones, but, also, hog bristles, porcupine quills or even pieces of agave leaves were used to pierce animal skins or cloth so that a form of thread could be inserted into the holes. The earliest preserved examples of bone needles have been found in caves in France, Russia and China. Eventually primitive needles developed two characteristics—a sharp, tapered point at one end and a hook or an eye at the other end so making a hole and pulling the thread through could be done simultaneously. Metal needles came into existence when materials such as iron and bronze were fashioned by blacksmiths. But early on, making needles remained largely a cottage industry—needles were made in people's homes.

The German cities of Nuremburg and Aachen became centers of modern needle-making with the evolution of materials such as brass and steel. In 1565, a German man named Elias Krause brought the drawn-wire technique of needle-making to the area of Redditch, England. The technique became so popular that by the mid 1700's, needle-making (along with fish-hook-making) was the most popular occupation in Redditch. Needle making was recognized as a licensed craft when, in 1656, a guild was formed--the Worshipful Company of Needle-makers. The Redditch area became the world's center of needle-making as grain mills along the Arrow River were converted to needle factories. Five million needles a week were being produced by 1825, increasing to 100 million by 1862. Entire families were employed as needle-makers, especially children whose acute eyesight was needed in the process.

Needles were made by cutting and drawing out wire enough for 2 needles, then tapering each end to a point, flattening the middle to punch out the eyes and finally breaking it into two separate needles. Continual changes occurred in the

process, including hardening and tempering and using machines to stamp and drill the eyes. Early employment records from the needle guild show professions such as needle pointers, needle setters, needle drillers, needle hardeners, needle eyers, needle straighteners, needle scourers, needle finishers, needler stampers and needle paperers. Many of these professions were dangerous, as minute pieces of steel flew off the needles in the process and landed in people's eyes or were breathed into their lungs. Needle pointers, in particular, rarely lived to be 30, dying from a type of tuberculosis known as pointer's rot. The final step in needle-making involved cleaning and polishing the raw metal in a process known as scouring. Needles were placed in bags of oil, soap and emery dust and rocked back and forth to remove all burrs. Needles for every-day use, known as Commons, were scoured for a day, while the finest needles, called Brights, might undergo a week of scouring.

Little has changed in the process of needle-making except that most of the steps are now done by machine. Needles are still made two at a time by the drawn-wire technique and they are still tapered, stamped, drilled and scoured much like they were when the process was done by hand.

I love that the Bible uses the everyday objects to teach important lessons. I imagine that when Jesus spoke to the gathered crowd and used an illustration regarding a needle, his listeners' ears would have perked up. A needle was a common object used by common people. Jesus was "speaking their language". Even the disciples would have knowledge of needles—as fishermen, they would have used this tool to mend their nets.

Here's what Jesus said from Matthew, chapter 19: "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."

There have been many guesses at the meaning of this simple verse. Some scholars look for twists. Did Jesus mean a literal or figurative camel? Is there some hidden interpretation, such as the difficulty a camel would have passing through a slot gate into Jerusalem, having to be divested of all its goods and getting down on its knees to crawl through?

In reality, it isn't that tricky. In speaking to the crowds, Jesus contrasts one of the smallest things they know—the eye of a needle—with one of the largest things they know—a camel. Jesus is using hyperbole, just as he does a few chapters before when he warns his listeners to remove the plank from their own eye before removing a speck from someone else's. No one was really walking around with an actual plank in their eye. It was an illustration.

The reaction of the disciples provides a further explanation. When Jesus is saying it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to get to heaven, they respond with, "who then can be saved?" So, who? Who can be saved if not a rich man? The answer is "no one". No one can be saved on their own merit. No one can use their riches to buy their way to heaven. No person, no matter how much money they have, how much they give away, how much charity they do, can enter heaven by themselves. Can an actual camel pass through the eye of an actual needle? No, that's impossible. Can a person, rich or not, get to heaven by their own efforts? No, that is impossible, too.

Jesus goes on to explain, "but with God all things are possible." Jesus was giving his disciples a clue. There was a way for people to enter heaven. Though it was impossible for any man to enter heaven on his own, God was providing the way. Those who trusted in Jesus's death on the cross as their sacrifice for sin could enter heaven.

It isn't a rich versus poor thing. It isn't a "am I good enough?" or a "have I done enough?" thing. It's me standing before God with no way of getting into heaven by sinful self. The only way is by putting my trust in Jesus. No amount of money, no good works, no great numbers of dresses or shorts that I may sew and give away will earn my place in heaven—that's impossible. Only Jesus. He made the impossible, possible.

This month as you sew, think about the needle. It's a simple tool with a lot of history behind it. Then think about your salvation. It's a simple choice with the immensity of Jesus's sacrifice behind it.