

2 Corinthians 12:1-10

Introduction

Sometimes people like to find out the secret lives of the famous. They want to know their private habits and thoughts, to satisfy their curiosity or to fuel idle gossip. In the Bible a veil is drawn aside and we get to see the inward lives of great men of God – not to satisfy our curiosity, but to build us up. Not to amuse us, but to edify us. It is easy to think that the great men of God had no problems, that they were spiritual giants, masters of every situation, having all the answers. Their sermons and books show the depth of their experience.

In truth, the great men of God, inside and outside of the Bible, are all like us, with the same passions, pressures, weaknesses and temptations. Paul was a good man – but he was only a man. In this passage we find Paul had a problem for which he did not have the answer, a pressure which was beyond him. And in his despair, he makes a deep discovery about God.

And so may we as we read along. No wonder this is one of the most treasured passages in all of Paul's writings. Many wounded hearts have been helped by it, and discouraged souls have found in it support and comfort.

Background to the problem

Through a tremendous personal experience fourteen years earlier (2 Corinthians 12:2), Paul had been caught up to the third heaven (the first heaven is the sky immediately above; the second heaven is the stars and the planets; the third heaven is the throne of God). **Caught up to paradise** (2 Corinthians 12:4) reminds us of Jesus' words to the dying thief, **Today you will be with me in paradise** (Luke 23:43). Paul was caught up into God's intimate presence, and he saw and heard indescribable things. He saw wonderful revelations and visions that were indescribable, mysteries and revelations which were not to be uttered.

Then he was brought back down to earth by the thorn in his flesh – Satan's messenger to buffet him, torment, frustrate, irritate, annoy and spoil his life. The Greek word for "torment" is in the present tense – it was a permanent trouble. What was that thorn in the flesh? There have been many guesses – spiritual temptation or opposition, epilepsy, headaches, eye trouble, malarial fever or – the least charitable suggestion – his wife (which he had at this stage). We simply do not know for sure, and that is a good thing. The very vagueness of the statement can suit any condition. If the problem was actually specified, we would be tempted to say that God's grace is only for that problem, and is no use to our situation.

Paul's vagueness can cover our every trial. We can all imagine such a situation, something which annoys and frustrates us, and we wish it weren't there – something to do with work, or home, in our Christian service, being the victim of gossip, a troubled relationship with someone, a physical weakness, a fear that no one knows about. Whatever it is, nothing is beyond God. Satan is the immediate agent, but it is

within God's sovereign permissive will. **There was given me...** tells us the ultimate source was God. Why did God permit it? **To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations** (2 Corinthians 12:7).

Spiritual conceit is always a problem (especially for evangelicals!). We can easily become proud of our spiritual experience, Bible knowledge, special blessing or success, compliments paid, how much we give and sacrifice. These things easily turn our brains, make us puffed up, and look down on others. They give us a sense of superiority, and we forget that it is God and His gifts which are the real source of what we have done and given.

So on the one hand Paul has this deep spiritual experience, but on the other hand he has this affliction which vexes him and keeps him humble. This teaches us never to envy others. They may seem to get on so well, but we never know what secret problems or trials they bear. Great privilege and heavy burdens often go together. No one has a smooth pathway.

Paul prayed three times for the thorn to be taken away. This was persistent, specific prayer – but God's answer was "No!" **My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness** (2 Corinthians 12:9). God does not always answer our prayers in the way we want. He did not remove the cup from Jesus when He prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane (Luke 22:42). But God always gives us the equivalent or compensation. He may not remove the problem, but He will make us adequate to bear it. He may not lighten the load, but He will strengthen the back. If God permits a trial, He gives the grace to bear it. He makes no mistakes. He does not always tell us why He has thus led us. He has wider horizons than ours. But by His grace He will see us through.

Have we prayed again and again for God to deal with somebody, some situation, or something which threatens to ruin our life or our testimony? Does God appear not to have dealt with it? But has He not indeed provided adequate grace?

Solution to the problem

My grace is sufficient – it is all you need. You will only discover the full extent of God's power when you are at your weakest. Then and only then will you discover fullness of life and grace in Christ to uphold, strengthen, comfort, enable and to turn trouble into something useful. He will bear us up, keep us and sustain us. And it is sufficient, no matter how hard that is to believe at times. We may have seen it has been sufficient in the past, and we may trust He is sufficient for the future, but when we are right in the middle of a seemingly disastrous problem, we doubt if He is sufficient for *now*. Remember He gives fresh supplies of grace every single day, and they are more than adequate. We do not need to escape from the situation or get out of the problem. There is adequate compensation in the grace of God.

H.W.Peploe lost his little child when on holiday at the seaside. He carried the child's coffin in his arms all the way home, and buried it later with his own hands. He looked at the text he was due to present the next Sunday – 2 Corinthians 12:9. He started to murmur against God's dealings, and flung down his pen. He fell on His knees, and cried out, "God, it is not sufficient. Make it sufficient." He opened his eyes and

noticed the same text was framed on the wall, given to him years before by his mother. The words “My” and “thee” were in black type, but the word “is” was coloured bright green. He realized he must accept that word “is”. He later wrote, “When God says, “is”, it is for you to believe Him and you will find it true every moment. That “is” changed my life. From that moment I could say I believe what you say in your word and will step out upon it now.”

Here is the glory of the Gospel – it is dynamic, and it is the power of God. Not word only, but power too (1 Thessalonians 1:5). There may be treasure in earthen vessels, but the excellency of power is of God and not us. The grace of God which brought Christ from heaven, saved us, and equipped us for service, is sufficient for us in every circumstance of life. Grace for every duty and difficulty, trial, service, sickness, letter we have to write, awkward person we have to meet, sermon, door we knock on, every temptation we face, every bit of bad news and disappointment. He gives special grace for special days and special emergencies. It is very personal. Grace for *me* in *my* circumstances, *my* tasks and *my* needs. He never gives us an exceptional task or puts us in exceptional circumstances without also giving us special grace.

God did not call us into the fellowship of His Son and then mock us and run away from us. **He who has begun a good work in us will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ** (Philippians 1:6).

Reaction to the problem

That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecution, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong (2 Corinthians 12:10). In weakness and adversity Paul made a discovery about God’s grace and strength, which he never would have proved if all had gone well. Problems and difficulties are like black velvet on which the diamonds of God’s grace glitter all the more brightly. Our weakness and despair are absolutely essential if God’s grace is going to be seen. God allowed Paul’s thorn to persist to show forth His grace and power.

If it means having a deeper experience of Christ, we ought not to resent weakness, but delight in it and be content with it. We may not like our afflictions in themselves, but we delight in them because they are the gateway to deeper blessing and experience of divine power. Our strength and cleverness is a hindrance to God. It is when we are broken, baffled and helpless that His blessings descend. While we cling on to our own plans, self-reliance and ability, we will never find God. It is only when we acknowledge our powerlessness, give up our strength, scheming and planning, and hand ourselves over to Christ in our emptiness and brokenness, that we learn the power of His grace.

The issue is not “Am I good enough and strong enough for God to bless”, but “Am I weak and frail enough for God to display His grace.” He empties us first before He fills us. He shows us we are inadequate before He makes us adequate. He brings us low before He raises us up. When we are powerless, then there is room for God’s power. As long as we have strength left in ourselves, we are only partially strong in God. How often the great “I” stands in God’s way. When confident in selves, we fail

badly or God withdraws His power. When we are content to be a nobody and nothing, then God and His grace becomes everything.

“When I am tempted to think that I am now an established Christian... I ought to pray and labour for the deepest sense of utter weakness and helplessness. I feel it would not be safe for me to renounce all my indwelling strength.... This is a delusion of the Devil. My only safety is to know and feel and confess my helplessness that I may hang on the arm of omnipotence” (Robert Murray McCheyne).

Conclusion

We all bear a thorn in the flesh – adversity, weakness, impossible situation, bereavement, failure... It can be very real, something we truly dread. God in His mercy will not lift this sense of weakness – it is our security. It is a backcloth to show off God’s grace and strength. Christ can meet us in the very situation we are in now. Let us speak to all in general and self in particular. **My grace is sufficient.**

They that wait on the Lord shall renew their strength (Isaiah 40:31). The unbeliever cannot know this blessing. The thorn is no blessing to him, but it makes him bitter and resentful. He has no Saviour to go to. He is like a ship in a storm with no harbour to go to.

After two or three attempts to capture a fortified position had failed, the Duke of Wellington told his favourite officer to take his men to capture the position. “Give me the grasp of your conquering hand, and I’ll do it.” The officer was fortified by that handshake, and he was successful in capturing the position.

My grace is sufficient. Step out on this text at once. Are we weak enough yet to prove Him?