

## **Humbling Weakness, Sufficient Grace**

2 Corinthians 12:7-10 – p. 970 in pew Bibles

*<sup>7</sup> So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. <sup>8</sup> Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. <sup>9</sup> But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. <sup>10</sup> For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*

Second Corinthians is a very personal letter for Paul and this passage especially is intensely personal for me. What we see in this letter is Paul opening up to his readers and being very raw and real. He’s baring his heart to them. Let me give a little background.

The overarching theme of this letter really is, “Christ’s power in Paul’s weakness.” It sets the tone for everything that he says to the Corinthians in this letter, especially in chapters 10-13. See, Paul was in a very awkward place, one that he really hated, actually. He was forced into having to defend his own apostleship because of opposition from certain false apostles who came in and were wreaking havoc in the Corinthian church that Paul started. These people, whom Paul referred to, mockingly, as “super-apostles,” were self-designated, self-affirming, self-boasting men who came into this weak congregation and were exploiting them for gain. It is reasonable to infer that these false apostles were projecting an image of Christian leadership characterized by power and personal proficiency, by strong oratory skills and strength of human ability. In chapter 11, Paul says of them, “For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness.”

And so there was Paul, whose personal presence probably seemed underwhelming. While the so-called “super-apostles”’ resumé included ethnic and religious pedigree, power and prestige, superior oratory skills and a strong presence, Paul’s resumé included weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. He may have been small in stature. He most likely lacked speaking proficiency, coming across, rather, as weak by the standard of Greek values. In chapter 10 of this letter Paul recounts some of what the false apostles said about him, that “his bodily presence is weak, and his speech of no account.” He also admits in chapter 11 to being “unskilled in speaking.” And yet Paul, rather than depend on a strong presence and strong speaking skills, boasted rather in his weakness and depended upon Christ’s strength, all of which was modeled according to the image of his Savior.

And so Paul found himself having to defend his apostleship.

But what is absolutely vital to understanding this letter, is that the reason Paul was defending his apostleship really had nothing to do with concern for himself or his own success. It had everything to do with his concern for the success of the gospel of Jesus Christ in the hearts of the Corinthian believers. Paul’s love and concern for them shines through this letter like a shining light. Paul knew that he had been called and approved by Christ, not himself, as he states in

chapter 10, “For it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends.” He was called to preach the gospel to them and build them up in their faith so that they would grow in their spiritual maturity. And so he was in anguish over them. Paul’s heart in chapters 10-13 is very much like it was for the Galatians when he described himself as being “in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in” them.

And so in chapter 11 Paul has a whole list of things which he rattles off which tell of the things he has suffered as a true apostle of Jesus Christ. And then in chapter 12 he reluctantly tells of times when God gave him heavenly visions, and a time when he was actually caught up into paradise and “heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter.”

Paul’s point in all this is that if there was anyone who really had reason to boast in having the qualifications and experiences of a true apostle of Jesus Christ, it was him. All these things were simply true about him. He says in verse 6, “though if I should wish to boast, I would not be a fool, for I would be speaking the truth; but I refrain from it,” he says, “so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me.”

Paul’s desire is not to puff himself up to others, boasting in his spectacular visions. Many today, if they had the experiences Paul did, might immediately publish a book entitled, *My Personal Rapture: The Shocking, True Account of My Trip to Heaven and Back*. And knowing today’s market, it would probably be an instant best-seller. But Paul was a man whose character revealed not human power and strength, or boasts of spectacular spiritual exploits, but Christian humility, so that Christ may be glorified in him. This provides essential wisdom for navigating the popular currents in today’s modern church. We must understand that regardless of how great a personal claim is made to visions and ecstasies, nothing can and nothing should ever replace a Christ-like life revealed in a person’s conduct and speech as indicators of someone who genuinely follows Christ. And what we find overwhelmingly throughout Scripture, is that God’s ways in dealing with mankind always involves showing Himself strong through the weakness of His people.

That brings us to the first point we see in our passage this morning which is found in verse 7:

### **1. God sovereignly uses suffering and weaknesses in order to make us humble. (v. 7)**

Paul’s overall thought in verse 7 is that because of the spectacular visions and revelations Paul received from God which would surely puff anyone up with pride, God determined that he needed to have something that kept his pride in check and which acted as a sanctifying agent. He states:

*<sup>7</sup> So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited.*

Now, as to what exactly the thorn was, we can only guess, except to know that it was “a messenger of Satan.” Some have speculated that the thorn was opposition, perhaps by the “super apostles” he talks about in previous chapters. The context does seem to indicate something along these lines. The word “messenger” is the same word that is translated “angel,” so it is very likely

that this was, indeed, some demonic influence which was sent to stir up opposition and strife for Paul in the Corinthian church which he loved so dearly.

Others, however, have supposed that the thorn is a specific ailment, like poor eyesight or some other physical malady. Whatever it was, the fact was, that Paul's thorn was certainly debilitating and, more than likely, humiliating. It might actually be by design that the thorn's identification is ambiguous because it allows for a broad application to the afflictions that God ordains for His children to suffer at times.

Note, that Paul says that the thorn "was given me." Now this is very important for us to see here. Certainly, it was Satan who was the direct agent of Paul's suffering. The text states so explicitly, it was a "messenger of Satan." But the fact that the text states that the thorn in his flesh was "given" to him, and the fact that the *reason* Paul states that it was given to him was to keep him humble, thus making him more Christ-like, leaves little room for doubt this suffering was given to him by God. Author and New Testament scholar R. Kent Hughes states it this way:

"the truth here about the thorn that we all should note is that while the thorn was Satan's work, it was God who allowed it. Just as God was the one who was responsible for the ecstasy of Paul's rapture to the third heaven, God was also responsible for the agony of his thorn. Divine wisdom determined that the thorn was what Paul needed, because without it the apostle would have become conceited."

This kind of thought would easily offend our human reasoning. Why would God allow suffering in His children? If we only looked at this issue through the eyes of our limited human and worldly point of view, we will never understand. But...if God opens our eyes to see that it is through our humility that He reveals His strength to the world, we would have a whole new attitude about it.

Time won't allow me to go into this in detail, but this is exactly what we see God doing with Job. God's Word says that God allowed Satan to test Job. He was left literally in dust and ashes. But God had a higher and greater purpose for Job but the path to it included great suffering.

This is God's way. Paul states this so unmistakably in the first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 1, verses 26-31:

*<sup>26</sup> For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. <sup>27</sup> But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; <sup>28</sup> God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, <sup>29</sup> so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. <sup>30</sup> And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, <sup>31</sup> so that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."*

Paul was an apostle of Jesus Christ. Such a calling meant that he was a first-hand witness to the risen Lord. Christ had called Paul with an extraordinary calling which he would be used by God to lay the foundation of the gospel for most of the Gentile world.

But if Paul was to be used greatly by God, he would need to be kept humble so that Christ could do His apostolic work through Him. Pride is a subtle and sinister sickness. Because of our sinful nature, whenever we experience any kind of success or if God uses us in any great way, our natural tendency is toward pride. Paul the apostle was human and was not exempt from this tendency. Pride isn't something you necessarily walk into purposely or even consciously. It is a sinister residue in our souls, a latent root in our hearts that can spring up and flower at any time given the right circumstances.

In his book "The Root of the Righteous," A.W. Tozer writes that it is "necessary" for God to use suffering in his holy work of preparing his saints, adding, "It is doubtful whether God can bless a man greatly until he has hurt him deeply."

You might say, "Now wait a minute! God would never hurt us! Would He?" But, brothers and sisters, if we can only understand how serious a matter pride is, how eternally damning, how destructive, how deadly an enemy pride is to God's precious children, you would see that God loves us too much not to inflict His loving wounds upon us in order to save us from such an evil. In a very real sense, God's careful and loving afflictions should be seen as His grace, not leaving us to ourselves, but, being the loving God that He is, He intervenes in our lives to bring about just the right circumstances that would keep us *from* ourselves.

It was through weaknesses, trials and suffering that God brought Paul, and kept him, in a place of humility and dependence so that God could do His great things through him. This brings us to our second point this morning...

## **2. Sometimes God's answer to our prayer is to increase His grace. (vv. 8-9a)**

*<sup>8</sup> Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. <sup>9</sup> But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."*

Whatever this thorn in the flesh was, it says Paul pleaded with God three separate times that He would remove it from him. Yet all three times God told him no. This shouldn't be seen as indicating that it was wrong for Paul to pray and ask God to remove his suffering. Even Jesus prayed to His Father, "if it be your will, remove this cup from me." God doesn't see the suffering itself as being good or as something we should look for. It is very appropriate for you to pray when you go through trials and suffering that God would remove it or bring healing for it. This actually shows our dependence upon God also, that when we encounter trials in this world, we see God as our deliverer and the source of our help.

The Psalms are filled with prayers to God, crying out for help in times of great need. This is pleasing to God for in those times we are brought near to Him and we depend upon Him.

Such was the case with Paul as well. This thorn in the flesh drove him to the throne of grace and kept him there. Paul knew that God was his very breath, and that He was “a very present help in time of need.”

But although it is right for us to go to God and ask for Him to deliver us from our trials and suffering, we must also be ready and willing for God to say, as He did to Paul, “My child, I love you, but I’m not going to take this from you. I want you to see my grace as sufficient for you and learn to depend upon my grace and cherish it.”

For it’s in those times that we begin to see things as they actually are. If we went through life always free from suffering, never experiencing trials, always having God relieve us from them whenever we ask, then we would only see this present world and never the greater picture of the greatness and majesty of God’s power and grace.

Oh, brothers and sisters, how often do we tend to live in the smallness and narrowness of this life, getting caught up in the busyness and cares of only our current concerns, living with the default attitude that our life is all about us, when all the while we miss the fact that everything – absolutely everything – is about Christ! Christ is not just a part of your life. God wants us to come to the place where we begin to see the reality that all of life – from our very breath that we breathe to our greatest accomplishments – all find their source and sustenance in Christ.

Colossians 1:16-17 says of Christ, “all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.”

Acts 17:28 – “in him we live and move and have our being.”

These are some of the most precious and powerful truths for us to know and to keep in our hearts. These truths cause us to see the world rightly and to see ourselves rightly in God’s universe and to cultivate and keep an attitude of humility and gratitude which is pleasing to God. It allows us to see that it is God’s grace alone that sustains us.

So, God answered Paul’s prayer by saying, “My grace is sufficient for you.” What is this grace that He was talking about?

Well, Scripture talks about common grace which is God’s general care for all the world, and it also talks about the grace which God gives us to save us and to give us eternal life. I don’t think these are what Jesus was referring to, though.

There are two other kinds of grace, and these are kinds of grace that are given to believers only. I’m referring to Sustaining Grace and Empowering Grace. These are the kinds of grace I think Jesus was referring to. Sustaining grace keeps you to the end. It gives you strength through this life and enables you to stand through temptation and trials so that your faith will be able to stand firm. This grace sees you through to that final day when we will stand before the Lord, and will allow you to hear those words, “Well done, my good and faithful servant.” Paul talks about this type of grace in Romans 5:2-5:

<sup>2</sup> Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. <sup>3</sup> Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, <sup>4</sup> and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, <sup>5</sup> and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

So I think Jesus was referring to this grace that sustains us to the end. Jesus would not remove the thorn in Paul's flesh because he wanted him to depend upon this grace because in doing so, Paul was depending on Christ Himself. Christ was his portion.

But I think Jesus was also referring to another kind of grace, what we could call Empowering Grace, the grace that empowers us and enables us to carry out the ministry that He has called us to. This is the very power of Christ Himself, which is shown through our weaknesses and suffering, which is our third point this morning...

### **3. It is through our weaknesses that Christ's power is revealed. (vv. 9b-10)**

*Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. <sup>10</sup> For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*

And this is really the main point of what Paul is saying here. But not only that, this reveals the core of Paul's very heart. Please don't miss this. The heart of this passage is that Christ's power and glory are everything to Paul. This is the thing that makes his heart beat. This is Paul at the core of his being.

And this encompasses two things:

First is the whole idea of bringing glory to Christ himself and his work and his faithfulness. The fact that through the display of our weakness, Christ is put on display as the One who accomplishes His good and perfect will in and through our lives. Even if that means that we look pitiful ourselves, it's what God does through us in the lives of others that leaves the world in awe. And that brings me to the second thing this encompasses:

In putting Christ Himself on display through our weaknesses, we are also brought to the place of a radical dependence upon God and an overwhelming desire for His power to work through us to accomplish His will. 1 Peter 4:11 says, "whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ."

I've said this before, but the work of bringing people to Christ and changing people's hearts is a supernatural work that requires a supernatural God. Notice this – notice the high value that Paul places on the power of Christ. Paul knew very well that Christ's power was absolutely necessary in order to accomplish what God had set him apart to accomplish. And he came to understand that it was through his weaknesses and trials and suffering that Christ's power was put on display in the greatest measure. As he states in chapter 3 of this same letter, verses 4-6, "Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, who made us sufficient

ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.”

This is what drove Paul. He had a passion for the gospel. Seeing people’s hearts changed by God’s Spirit. He said in Romans 1:16, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ for it is the power of God unto salvation for all who believe.” This was the core and center of Paul’s passion. And if it meant that this would be accomplished through Christ bringing him low through suffering and weakness, then so be it!

He said, “For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.” When he says “I am content with these sufferings” it doesn’t mean Paul was a masochist, or that he enjoyed suffering and asked for more. What it does mean is that he was willing to suffer if that’s what Christ demanded of him, so that Christ’s power would rest upon him. It was all for the sake of Christ!

As I said earlier, this message is intensely personal to me. When I was very young, I developed a speech impediment which I have had all my life. I had it all through elementary school, and Junior High, and all through High School. Through college, and all through my years in the work force. And in 1997 when I entered the ministry, I had this speech impediment then.

I have to be honest. You never get used to it. I have known humiliation, embarrassment. When I was a kid I endured ridicule and people laughing at me. When I became an adult, that changed to an overall sense that people just don’t take you as seriously because you can’t talk fluently. And I have asked God, well more than three times, to take this from me. And yet He hasn’t.

And because of that, I never ever saw myself in the pulpit preaching. Ministry for me was just going to involve music because, well, I could do that. And yet I have had a passion for the Word of God and a fire in my bones to see that word taught and proclaimed.

Well, about 5 years ago, God began to show me that He had another story to write in my life. It was then that he began opening up opportunities for me to preach in the pulpit. And so I did. And I found that when I stood in the pulpit, it was like God just took over my mouth. And so I continued to preach. And God continued to open up opportunity after opportunity. Even receiving calls from other churches to come and preach. Recently I received an invitation from a pastor friend of mine in Kenya to come and preach an evangelistic meeting and to hold a marriage seminar.

It has been through these opportunities that God has opened up to preach that I have learned a deep dependence upon God like I’ve never known before. I know two things very well. First, I know that unless God gives me the grace to speak, I will fail. I know very well what my weakness is. Folks, when it’s time for me to stand behind that pulpit, I feel completely insufficient. I am literally on my face before the Lord, begging Him to help me. And I know, it would be so much easier if God would simply take away this weakness. And yet I am driven to preach His Word.

But second, I know that I cannot change one life. If I have any hope of seeing any real fruit from my preaching, I know that the Holy Spirit MUST do it. And so each time, in preparing a sermon, in practicing the sermon, before I preach, and during each sermon, I am continually in prayer, desperately calling upon God for grace. I cannot do this without Him!

And so there are times that I still struggle with my everyday speech. But if this is what God has chosen for me to suffer so that I may know a greater dependence upon Him and so that I may know a depth of His grace that I would otherwise miss, then I will gladly boast in my weaknesses so that the power of Christ may rest upon me! Because to me, *that* is the greatest calling of all! Because I love His Word, I love the gospel, and I want to see people's lives changed.

That brings me to something that I want to share with you all. I believe that God has made it abundantly clear in recent days, that He is transitioning me into the next phase of my life and ministry, into more of a preaching and teaching pastoral role. I've been in worship ministry for 21 years, and I have been privileged to serve as youth pastor here for the past three. But I look back over those 21 years and I can see that He has prepared me for this. The experiences I've had, the things that He has brought us through, I believe all have been preparation for this.

But two things are happening:

1. God has been opening doors for me in pulpit ministry and has confirmed this calling through several avenues in the body of Christ including men of God who have affirmed time and time again that His gifting in these years of my life is in preaching, shepherding, and teaching adults.
2. At the same time, I want you to know that I have struggled more and more lately with my hearing in leading worship. Even with hearing aids, it's difficult for me to hear what I need to hear. Not so much in terms of volume, but in terms of being able to hear the beat of the song and the different parts and instruments.

At the same time, I know that I have reached my limit of effectiveness in being able to really connect with the youth. I'm 47 years old, I have physical limitations that keep me from really participating with them in some things like I want to. And although I love them more than they probably realize, I also know that these things are barriers.

Having said a that, I want to let you know that I have entered a time of searching for what God has next in His will for me and my family. This is difficult in many, many respects. Jamie and I, and our whole family, love it here...we love Iowa and we love you all very dearly. I want to make it clear that no one has asked us to leave, nothing negative has happened, this really is all about God showing me very clearly that He is bringing me into a new phase of ministry. I don't know how long the process will take. But I would ask you all to please help me pray that God's perfect will would be done.

I also want you to know that the elders of this church have been so good to us, and they have affirmed me and support me in this new call.