

My Grace Is Sufficient for You

2 Corinthians 12:1–10

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Introduction

This week our church suffered a tragedy. A family in our congregation, while traveling on vacation, came upon stopped traffic on the interstate. The car behind them did not stop. Traveling at seventy or seventy-five miles per hour, it plowed into them — killing their eight-year-old daughter. The parents, family, and friends are distraught, asking the questions that grief always asks: Why? Why did this happen? Why was this child taken? Why did God not prevent it? Why did God not answer the prayers of those who pleaded for a different outcome?

There are moments when the questions we ask about suffering are not theoretical. They come from places of grief, confusion, fear, and pain. Our passage today, by God's grace, is a passage that speaks directly to these questions and to our grief. I am grateful that I have had the privilege of living in this passage this week.

Boasting in Weakness: A Review

We have been studying 2 Corinthians since Easter. For the past several weeks, we have been following Paul's confrontation with the false apostles who had entered the church at Corinth. These men boasted in their credentials, their abilities, their spiritual experiences, their influence, and their apparent success. Paul responded with a very different kind of boast.

Paul boasted in the things that revealed his weakness — and he did so for reasons we examined last week. His weakness revealed the power of God. His weakness revealed his dependence upon God's grace. His weakness revealed his love for the church. His weakness revealed the supreme worth of knowing Jesus. Whatever good had been accomplished through Paul's ministry had not been accomplished by Paul's natural strength. It had been accomplished by the power of Christ working in and through him.

Now, in our passage today, Paul says something that initially sounds strange — something that even appears to contradict his commitment to boasting in weakness. Read with me from 2 Corinthians 12:1–6:

I must go on boasting. Though there is nothing to be gained by it, I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven — whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. And I know that this man was caught up into paradise — whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows — and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter. On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses — 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, so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me.

At first glance, it appears that Paul has finally entered the false apostles' game of spiritual one-upmanship. "You have had visions? I have had visions. You claim to have gone up to the second heaven? I have been to the third heaven. You have seen spiritual realities? I was caught up into paradise."

But that is not what Paul is doing. He is trying very hard not to make this sound like a boast. This is why he speaks in the third person about himself: "I know a man in Christ." He is purposefully distancing himself from the experience because he does not want the Corinthians to evaluate him by secret spiritual experiences that no one else can verify. That is precisely what the false apostles are doing. Paul, by contrast, wants to be evaluated by what people can see in his life and hear in his teaching.

That is why he says in verse 6: "*I refrain from it, so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me.*" Paul is not trying to impress the Corinthians. He is preparing to teach them something about suffering, weakness, grace, and the sufficiency of Christ. But before we get there, it is important to understand why Paul is talking about this experience of being caught up to paradise at all.

Caught Up into Paradise

Notice in verse 2 that Paul says this experience happened fourteen years earlier. Based on historical documents, the dates of Paul's travels given in Scripture, and the broader archaeological and historical record, we can date Paul's writing of 2 Corinthians to approximately 56 AD. Fourteen years prior would place this experience around 42 AD — squarely within what scholars sometimes call the "silent years" of Paul's life.

Paul had encountered Jesus on the road to Damascus in 35 AD. He had been called to carry the gospel to the nations. Yet his early ministry did not unfold as he might have expected. He was driven out of Damascus. He was threatened in Jerusalem. The believers there sent him home to

Tarsus, where he largely disappears from the story of Acts for at least five years. Perhaps he made tents. Perhaps he preached quietly in local synagogues. But the great calling he had received seemed to have stalled. I wonder whether Paul ever felt forgotten during those years. I wonder whether he ever asked, “Lord, did I misunderstand your calling? Have you set me aside? Will you ever use my life in the way you promised?” Have you ever asked questions like that? Have you ever felt forgotten, or believed God had called you to something, only to find yourself waiting — or simply asking, “Why?”

It was during this hidden season in Paul’s life that God did something extraordinary. Paul says that he was “caught up to the third heaven,” and then, in verse 3, he describes it as being “caught up into paradise.” Paul did not merely receive information about heaven. He did not simply have a dream in which he saw heavenly images. He was caught up into paradise — into the very dwelling place of God. Whether this occurred in his body or apart from his body, Paul could not say. But he knew the experience was real.

He saw realities he would never fully describe. He heard things he was not permitted to repeat. He experienced the presence of God in a manner so overwhelming that, fourteen years later, he still spoke about it reluctantly and in the third person.

And after that experience, for the next fourteen years, Paul would suffer almost beyond description. He would be stoned at Lystra, beaten with rods at Philippi, mocked in Athens, and opposed in Corinth. He would face riots, imprisonments, sleepless nights, hunger, danger, and rejection. Yet Paul carried within himself a certainty that no suffering could erase. He had seen the glory that awaited him. He had tasted, however briefly, the joy of the immediate presence of God. He knew, beyond any doubt, what he proclaimed in Romans 8:18:

“For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.”

Paul was not speaking theoretically. He had seen enough of that glory to spend the next fourteen years gladly suffering for Christ. Heaven was not merely a doctrine he believed — it was a reality he had experienced. That hidden encounter with God sustained a public ministry marked by weakness, sacrifice, suffering, and joy. By God’s grace, he had been given everything he needed to sustain him in the calling God had placed upon his life. That is the point Paul is building toward. The experience of feeling forgotten, the vision of paradise, and the long years of suffering that followed — this is the pattern he now draws upon to address the present.

The Thorn

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. (2 Corinthians 12:7)

We do not know what Paul's thorn was. Some have suggested illness, impaired eyesight, temptation, physical pain, or continual opposition from enemies. Paul does not identify it, and I think that is intentional. By leaving it unnamed, every suffering believer can recognize something of their own experience in Paul's words. Your thorn may not be Paul's thorn, but you know what it is to live with something you have repeatedly asked God to remove. You know what it is to pray for healing that has not come, to ask for a relationship to be restored, for grief to be lifted, for a burden to be taken away, for anxiety to quiet, for opposition to end, or for some weakness to finally disappear.

Paul calls his affliction "a messenger of Satan to harass me." But he also says that the thorn "was given" to him. I think it is worth pausing here, because we are not told who gave it. Was it God? Was it Satan? Something else? We do not know — and I would suggest that this is the same uncertainty we face with our own thorns. We do not always know the source or the cause of our suffering. Where does suffering come from? Why do bad things happen?

Sometimes the answer is ourselves. Actions have consequences, which is why Scripture calls us to examine ourselves and repent of sin. Sometimes the answer is other people — the choices others make carry consequences for those around them. Sometimes the answer is simply that we live in a world marred by sin, and things happen that no one intended: bodies become sick, storms form, accidents occur. Sometimes the answer is Satan — there is a real evil that seeks to devour and destroy. And sometimes the answer is God, who works according to his purposes and glory in ways that are beyond our comprehension. I do believe in miracles. God is active in this world and in our lives.

And so when tragedy strikes, when there is suffering and heartache and grief, I do not always know the why. All of these causes and answers intertwine.

But here is what I do know: over all of them stands the sovereignty of God. God is sovereign over human sin. God is sovereign over satanic opposition. God is sovereign over the brokenness of creation. This does not mean that God approves of evil or delights in suffering. It means that no suffering occurs outside his knowledge or beyond his sovereign authority.

The fact that God uses a messenger of Satan in Paul's life does not make Satan good. It simply means that Satan is not sovereign. Satan cannot act beyond the boundaries of God's authority, and he cannot prevent God from accomplishing his good purposes for his children. Satan's intention was to harass and discourage Paul. God's intention was to humble and preserve him.

Satan desired to use the thorn to weaken and destroy. God sovereignly used the very same thorn to keep Paul dependent upon Christ.

And the same can be said about any hurt or heartache in your life. The fact that God is using some grief, some illness, some loss in your life does not mean that the grief or illness or loss is good. It simply means that no thorn is sovereign in your life. God is. And God can use even the broken things of your life for his good purposes in you and through you.

The Prayer

Notice that Paul prays for the thorn to be removed:

Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. (2 Corinthians 12:8)

Whatever this thorn was, Paul did not enjoy it. He pleaded with Christ to remove it, and he was right to do so. We should pray for healing. We should pray for protection. We should pray for broken relationships to be restored, for addictions to be overcome, for injustice to end, and for suffering to be relieved. These are faithful, God-honoring prayers.

But sometimes God's answer is no. The illness remains. The relationship is not restored. The door does not open. The person we love still dies. And when God says no, we naturally want an explanation. We want to know why. But Christ does not explain the thorn to Paul. He does not tell Paul how long it will last or reveal everything it will accomplish. Christ answers Paul's prayer not by giving him an explanation, but by giving him something better. He gives Paul himself.

Grace

But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." (2 Corinthians 12:9)

This is the central truth of the passage. Paul's relief came not through the removal of the thorn, but through an abiding relationship with Christ.

Paul asked Christ to change his circumstances. Christ promised to sustain him within those circumstances. Paul asked for the thorn to depart. Christ promised that his grace would remain. Paul asked for relief through removal. Christ gave him relief through communion.

God deals with our grief, our heartache, our suffering, and our illness not primarily by removing them, but by giving us something greater — himself. This is what Paul had learned fourteen years earlier, and it had not changed. *“My grace is sufficient for you.”*

The word *grace* — *charis* in the Greek — is the word the New Testament uses to describe all the generous goodness of God, freely given and unmerited, to us through Jesus Christ. Grace is a favor bestowed, a generous benefit freely given. It is the goodness and power of God applied to our lives to save us, keep us, enable us, deliver us, sanctify us, and ultimately glorify us. All of God’s good gifts to his children flow through this generous goodness called grace.

Back in chapter 9, verse 8, Paul had already written:

“And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work.”

Notice the abundance of that promise: all grace, all sufficiency, all things, all times. God possesses an inexhaustible supply of grace for every circumstance into which he calls his people. There is grace to resist temptation. There is grace to obey when obedience is costly. There is grace to continue serving when you are weary. There is grace to endure disappointment, grief, weakness, and pain. There is grace to keep trusting Christ when the thorn remains.

And notice whose grace it is. Christ says, *“My grace.”* There is much in this passage that we do not know. We do not know exactly what Paul saw or heard in the third heaven. We do not know whether he was there in body or in spirit. We do not know what the thorn was, or who gave it. But there is one thing we do know: we know whose grace it is that sustains us. *My grace.* The grace of Christ.

Christ was not saying, “Paul, you are stronger than you think.” He was saying, “Paul, I will be enough for you. My presence will sustain you. My power will uphold you. I will meet you in the very place where you are weakest.”

Paul wanted Christ to remove the thorn. Christ gave Paul something greater: the promise of his abiding presence.

And so Paul responds in verses 9 and 10:

Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. 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.

The weakness is Paul’s. The power is Christ’s. God does not always display his power by removing suffering. But to those who trust him, his grace and power are always present. Paul

did not rejoice because suffering was pleasant. He rejoiced because his weakness had become the very place where he experienced the presence and power of Christ.

Paul had once been caught up into paradise and experienced the presence of God there. But now he discovers that he does not need to return to the third heaven to meet Christ. Christ meets him in the thorn. Christ meets him in weakness. Christ meets him in hardship. Christ meets him in grief. And it is this abiding presence — this relationship with Christ — that causes Paul to rejoice.

Conclusion

And that is the only answer to the many questions we have. Why? Why did this happen? Why was this child taken? Why did God not prevent it? I do not know. But what I do know is that in our grief, in our weakness, in our hardship, he does not leave us alone. He draws near and gives us everything we need — and most importantly, he gives us himself. And this giving of himself is grace. And it is sufficient.

This morning we come to the Lord's Table, and it is a visible reminder of that grace. The bread reminds us of the body of Christ given for us. The cup reminds us of his blood poured out for the forgiveness of our sins. At this table we remember that Jesus died the death we deserved so that we might receive the life he deserved. He bore our guilt so that we might receive his righteousness. He endured the judgment of God so that we might enjoy peace with God. He was forsaken so that we would never be abandoned.

And because Christ gave himself for us at the cross, we can trust that he will continue to give himself to us in every weakness, sorrow, and trial. The One who says, *"My grace is sufficient for you,"* is the same One who says, *"This is my body, which is for you,"* and *"This cup is the new covenant in my blood."* Remember me — for as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death, and his grace, and his power, until he comes again.