

ESF, Sunday service message
6/26/2016

God's Sufficient Grace

2 Corinthians 12:7-10

⁷ To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. ⁸ Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. ⁹ 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 about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. ¹⁰ That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Louis Pasteur was a French scientist in the 19th century. He discovered ways to control harmful bacteria, and germs, and discovered a vaccination. When he was 44 years old, a brain stroke partially paralyzed him and his health became poor. Did he stop his work then? No. Despite his poor health he continued his work for 30 more years and made major contributions to modern chemistry and medicine.

The apostle Paul also lived with serious physical weakness. He called it a "thorn" in his flesh. He struggled with pain associated with the weakness. He really wanted to be free from his weakness. He earnestly pleaded with the Lord to take it away from him. But God was silent. Later he found out an important truth. It is that he could be strong in his weakness. He found the truth that even if he was weak, he could live a victorious life. He found the truth that God's grace was sufficient in his weakness.

We all have some type of thorns which make us weak and give us pain. We want to be free from the thorns. We pray to God for the removal of the thorns. God may answer our prayer as we ask. But what if God does not answer our prayer as we expect? Does it mean that God does not

listen to our prayer? Does it mean that God does not love us? No. It means God has a different plan and a better plan for us. By the example of Paul, God shows us what His better plan is. It is that God makes His grace sufficient in our weakness.

Sufficient grace of humility

Humility brings many blessings in our lives. But pride is one of the tools the devil uses to destroy us. Proverbs 16:18 says, *Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall.* Proverbs 29:23 says, *A man's pride brings him low, but a man of lowly spirit gains honor.*

God uses pain and suffering in our lives to make us humble. This shows us God's sufficient grace. This is the truth which Paul testifies here.

God used a thorn in Paul's flesh to make him humble. The thorn might have been some physical sickness, or pain caused by persecution, or some particular weakness or defect of character. Paul wished to be free from the trouble and pain caused by the thorn and earnestly prayed to God to take it away. However, instead of setting him free from the thorn, God help Paul become humble through the weakness caused by the thorn: *To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh* (verse 7).

Paul had many reasons to be proud of himself. He was an honor student in the school of the most famous and respected teacher, Gamaliel. Although he was a Jew, he was born as a Roman citizen and had many privileges. In religious circles, he was a member of the Pharisees who had powerful authority in Jewish society. In terms of Christian faith, the risen Lord Jesus appeared him directly and gave him the title of apostle to the gentiles. The Lord had shown him marvelous things in heaven through a special revelation (Acts 22:3; 2 Cor. 11:22-27; 12:1-6; Galatians 1:11-14).

Therefore, without such a weakness caused by the thorn, he could have been a man of pride. And his pride could have caused his downfall. But through his physical weakness, God reminded him constantly of how a fragile person he was and this made him humble. When he was humble, he depended on not himself but God. And God used him for His glory.

God's primary purpose for us is not to make our lives easy without any trouble. His primary purpose for us is to make us holy. Through the work of his Son, Jesus Christ God has declared us to be his forgiven children. We deserve to be forsaken and rejected by God, but God's grace has promised us that we are His children who have an everlasting home with Him. God has declared us to be holy – pure and innocent in His eyes. In order to keep us holy, He will humble us.

We know the importance of humility. But often we do not know whether we are proud or humble and do not know how to be humble. The devil discourages and depresses us through our weakness. But God uses our weakness to make us humble. When we are humble, He makes His grace sufficient for us.

The first construction of the Eddy Stone Lighthouse for the English Channel off the coast of Plymouth was placed there over 250 years ago to warn ships of the dangerous reefs. Winstanley, the architect who built it, was so confident of its strength that he had written on the cornerstone "Blow, O ye winds! Rise, O ocean waves! Break forth ye elements and try my work!" They were foolish words. Less than 3 years later a violent storm destroyed the lighthouse along with Winstanley and others who were doing repairs on it at the time. In 1756 John Smeaton, an early leader in civil engineering, rebuilt it. He found a new sight and dug down deep into solid rock. He was a Christian, and on the cornerstone he wrote the words, "Except the Lord build the house its builders labor in vain". Since then it has stood every test and it stands there today.

God's thorns come in all shapes and sizes: migraine headaches, bad backs, arthritis, depression, anxiety spells, cancer, an impossible boss, a rebellious child, and on and on. Though thorns vary in length and severity, most of us have at least one at any given time. The thorns might cause pain or frustration. But God's purpose in the thorns is to keep us from relying on ourselves, from becoming arrogant people, and to make us humble. This is God's sufficient grace.

Sufficient grace of prayer

In suffering from his weakness, Paul prayed earnestly to God for healing: *Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me* (verse 8). Here, "three times" mean serious and frequent prayer for healing. Through pain he became a man of prayer. Because of the pain Paul learned to draw nearer to God in prayer. While he was praying, he became spiritually alive.

When we see examples of people in the Bible who received God's miraculous blessings, most of them are people who earnestly prayed in the midst of their weakness. Let us see just some examples.

While Moses was leading the Israelites in the desert for forty years, he suffered a lot from countless obstacles and troubles. In suffering, the only thing he could do was praying. In suffering, he became a man of prayer (Ex. 15:22-27; 17:1-7, 8-13 etc.). Through earnest prayers, he could see God's glory and God's deliverance constantly.

Hannah was living in great pain because of her barrenness. She earnestly sought God's help to remove the cause of the pain. Through the pain, she became a woman of prayer (1 Samuel ch.1). And she received the power of God's Spirit and gave birth to not only one child but several children.

In the book of Acts, when the believers were persecuted, they came to pray earnestly. While they prayed, they experienced spiritual strength and God's miraculous deliverance (Acts 4:23-31).

Years ago in the northeastern United States codfish was a big commercial business. There is a market for eastern cod all over, especially on the West Coast. The demand posed a problem to the shippers. At first they froze the cod, then shipped them elsewhere, but the freezing took away much of the flavor. So they experimented with shipping them alive, in tanks of seawater, but that proved even worse. Not only was it more expensive, the cod still lost its flavor and, in addition, became soft and mushy. The texture was seriously affected. Finally, some creative person solved the problem in a most innovative manner. The codfish were placed in a tank of water along with their natural enemy--the catfish. From the time the cod left the East Coast until it arrived at its westernmost destination, those ornery catfish chased the cod all over the tank. And, you guessed it, when the cod arrived at the market, they were as fresh as when they were first caught. There was no loss of flavor nor was the texture affected. If anything, it was better than before.

While we live with some kinds of thorns, God uses thorns like the catfish in a tank to bring necessary tension that keeps us alive and fresh. It's part of God's plan to shape our character so we become mature. We learn to pray earnestly for God's help in the midst of pain and trouble caused by the thorns. And through prayers God makes us spiritually alert, alive and growing. That is God's sufficient grace.

Sufficient grace of power

Paul begged God to take the thorn away three times. Paul poured out his heart. But God was silent. Imagine Paul's disappointment. Finally, God answered his prayer. But it was not what Paul was expecting. God said *"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in*

weakness" God did not remove the thorn. However, God gave him power in the weakness of the thorn. What kind of power was it?

It was the power of Christ. What is the power of Christ? It is the power of His suffering. When it comes to thorns Jesus was our example. His entire life was a life with thorns. He was a sinless person but lived among sinners. He was constantly misunderstood, criticized, rejected, betrayed by his family, friends, religious leaders, and politicians. Finally, He was arrested, mocked, insulted, tortured and crucified. On the cross Jesus wore a crown of thorns. He bore our thorns on himself for us. He made himself weak enough to suffer and die. But His weakness to suffer and die on the cross turned into the power of healing and redemption.

Isiah 53:4-5 says,

*Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering,
yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted.
But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our
iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him,
and by his wounds we are healed.*

It would have been so much easier for God to just lean through the clouds and smite the world perfect. To wipe it clean of all the taint of sin. But Jesus didn't do it that way, because in order to bring us salvation, Jesus had to become weak. As Philippians 2 tells us, He had to set aside His divinity and humble Himself, making Himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant. Becoming human and humbling Himself even unto death, even death on a cross.

When we compare our thorns with the thorns of Christ, they are far less than Christ's thorns. By the thorns of His cross, Christ comforts us when we are suffering from our thorns. By the thorns of His cross, Christ set us free from bitterness, and gives us the power of forgiveness. By the thorns of His cross, He gives us the power of His resurrection to deal with our thorns victoriously. So Paul says, *Therefore I will boast all the*

more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me.

There is an Evangelist named David Ring. David is a shining example of an individual suffering from a human weakness, a thorn if you will, but with Christ's power, he has overcome the thorn. David was born October 28, 1953 and suffered from cerebral palsy. David said that he could not speak plainly, he could not walk like the other children and he could not use his hands and arms like everyone else. David suffered much because of the remarks of the other children. He said his mama loved him and he was very close to her. David became an orphan at the age of 14 years. No one wanted him, so he went from family to family never finding a home. David was in much pain, both physical and mental. He was constantly being ridiculed in public. For David to become discouraged was very easy. He was told that no one liked him and that he would never amount to anything. People told him that he would never get married and have a family. Today, David has a beautiful wife, three beautiful daughters and a very handsome son. All this came about because David formed a personal relationship with his Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. God showed David how to accept his physical problem and turn it into a blessing and a victory. David touches some 100,000 people each year. He speaks at approximately 200 churches a year.

God did not remove David Ring's thorn as he did not remove Paul's thorn, but God empowered them with Christ's power in their weakness. Our weakness could become a place of God's power. When you have nagging problems that just won't go away – a pain that will not subside, a child that will not obey, a co-worker that will not respect you, a loss that you just can't seem to recover from – and you wonder, "God, is your power strong enough to enable me to handle this?", he responds with, "My strength is greatest when you are weakest. I can get you through anything."