

“My Grace Is Sufficient”

The Ninth in a Series of Sermons on 2 Corinthians

Texts: 2 Corinthians 12:1-10; Job 2:1-13

No one wants to suffer. If there were some way for God’s people to avoid suffering, you would think that Paul would have figured it out. Paul experienced a number of extraordinary events that might have given him answers to the mystery of human suffering. Paul was taken up to the third heaven and heard things he was forbidden to tell. The resurrected Christ appeared to Paul while Paul was on his way to Damascus to hunt down and arrest Christians. People were healed because they merely touched Paul’s personal items. You would think that *if* there were answers to the mystery of why we suffer and how we could avoid it, Paul would have discovered them. And yet, Paul suffered horribly. In 2 Corinthians 12, Paul tells us why.

As we make our way through the closing chapters of 2 Corinthians (chapters 10-13), Paul has learned that certain men, whom he identifies as false apostles, were wreaking havoc on the church back in Corinth, soon after Paul had departed from the city. Paul warns the Corinthians that these men are servants of Satan who masquerade as servants of righteousness. After reminding the Corinthians that these false apostles will get exactly what their deeds deserve (v. 15), in the balance of 2 Corinthians 11, Paul discusses his own suffering as an apostle. Throughout his spirited defense of his apostolic calling, we learn a number of amazing things about the Apostle’s own recent history of suffering and tribulation.

No doubt, the question of human suffering is a difficult one. In a number of places, the Bible addresses the problem associated with the apparent injustice of the suffering of God’s people, while the wicked seemingly prosper—often times at the expense of the righteous. Throughout the Psalms, and especially in the Book of Job, the Bible tackles the subject of suffering head on, revealing to all who will accept the answer that all human suffering ultimately traces back to the fall of our race in Adam. The Bible also gives us hope in the midst of suffering. We are told that God has a purpose in our suffering (even if that purpose is not known to us). God even promises to turn our suffering into good—cf. Romans 8:28-39.

Our own Savior is identified as the “man of sorrows.” Jesus suffered physical pain and spiritual anguish beyond anything we can imagine that Friday afternoon when he hung on a Roman cross, forsaken by his father, to save us from the guilt and power of our sin. Although we may not get the answer we want when we raise our questions about human suffering, at least it is clear from the doing and dying of Jesus that God is not some cruel sadist who delights in tormenting us. In the cross of Jesus Christ, we find a suffering Savior who knows firsthand what human suffering is like. Because the suffering servant died in agony, and yet was triumphant over death and the grave through his resurrection, we get a hint of God’s way of resolving the suffering of the saints—the suffering we experience in this life, will give way to a resurrection unto unspeakable glory in the next. Christ’s triumph over sin and death, will be our triumph.

Paul speaks directly to the matter of his own personal suffering in 2 Corinthians 11-12. God’s people often turn to this section of Scripture to find an answer as to *why* we suffer, and whether or not there is anything we can do to alleviate our suffering when our time to suffer comes. What is especially troubling to many who turn to this particular text for comfort is that God’s answer to Paul’s request to be delivered from his suffering is a resounding “no.” It is easy to reason that if God forces the Apostle Paul to suffer, then that doesn’t seem to give much hope to the rest of us who are not as pious as Paul, or who have not experienced the miraculous things he did. If God told Paul “no” when he asked for relief from a difficult situation, what hope to do we have of getting a “yes” when we ask?

This biblical text rises an important question about biblical interpretation. Can we take Paul's words in 2 Corinthians—when he explains the nature of his own suffering—as a reason or an explanation for why we suffer? I think the answer to this question is “no.” As we will see, Paul is called to suffer specific things for a very specific reason. Therefore, Paul's suffering has little to do with God's particular purpose for each one of us and for that which he calls us to endure. And yet, when Paul recounts that God's answer to Paul's request to be delivered from his suffering was “no,” we do indeed find help and guidance from Paul, who reminds us that no matter what suffering God calls us to endure in this life, God's grace is always sufficient.

So, with that bit of context before us, we turn to 2 Corinthians 11:16-33, which sets the backdrop for our text, the first ten verses of 2 Corinthians 12. Recall from our discussion of the opening verses of 2 Corinthians 11, Paul was dealing with a group of false teachers who had arrived in Corinth shortly after he had left. These men were seeking to undermine Paul's apostolic authority and office, so as to establish their own. The false teachers were openly critical of Paul's speaking abilities. He was not skilled in classic Greek rhetoric, as were they. They also saw the apostle as weak—in addition to their low estimation of Paul's personal presence, they saw the Apostle as someone who would not deal with them in person.

In responding to these unfounded accusations, Paul explains that it was Jesus Christ himself who called Paul to his office as apostle to the Gentiles. The false teachers have no authority except that of which they have convinced themselves. It was Jesus Christ himself who opened a door for Paul to go and preach the gospel in new areas (Macedonia and Troas), preventing him from staying on in Corinth. Although Paul may not have been as skilled in classical Greek rhetoric as those men he derisively calls “super-apostles,” Paul skillfully uses a bit of irony (a rhetorical skill prized by Greeks) in his warning to the Corinthians not to be taken in by these men. Playing on the actual charges the false teachers made against him in a self-deprecating way, Paul exposes their “wisdom” for what it truly is, “foolishness.”

In verses 16-19 of 2 Corinthians 11, Paul makes his case that only a fool boasts in his own wisdom, instead of relying on the wisdom of God as revealed in the cross of Jesus Christ. If not mocking the false teachers directly, at the very least, Paul uses a bit of irony to make his point. *“I repeat, let no one think me foolish. But even if you do, accept me as a fool, so that I too may boast a little. What I am saying with this boastful confidence, I say not with the Lord's authority but as a fool. Since many boast according to the flesh, I too will boast. For you gladly bear with fools, being wise yourselves!”*

Only fools boast in themselves, thinking themselves to be wise when they are not. So Paul will play the fool and boast about his own experiences so as to expose the foolishness of the false teachers for what it truly is. In doing this, Paul does not cite an Old Testament text, nor does he appeal to one of the memorized sayings of Jesus to make his case—what he calls the “Lord's authority.” Instead, Paul speaks like a fool (on their terms). In doing so, Paul recounts what God has done in and through his ministry, demonstrating that Paul has Christ's authority and calling. Unlike the false apostles, Paul is willing to be identified with the scandal of Christ crucified, the basis for his own personal suffering.

In not discerning God's wisdom from the so-called wisdom of Greco-Roman paganism, ironically, the Corinthians were making themselves slaves to the very paganism from which they have been set free. In playing the fool, Paul exposes the foolishness of the Corinthians as they have allowed themselves to be taken in by the false doctrine of the false apostles. In verse 20 Paul writes, *“for you bear it if someone makes slaves of you, or devours you, or takes advantage of you, or puts on airs, or strikes you in the face.”* The false teachers are not teaching the Corinthians anything of value. In fact, just the opposite is true. The false apostles are exploiting the Corinthians and making slaves of them, taking advantage of them, looking down on them, and striking them in the face (figuratively speaking). Even though the

Corinthians should know better, they still allow these men to teach and preach, giving the devil himself a foothold in the church. In verse 21, Paul chastises them for doing so when he writes, *“to my shame, I must say, we were too weak for that!”* The false teachers mocked Paul’s supposed weakness. Yet, Paul never took advantage of the Corinthians, unlike those who claim to be stronger and wiser than everyone else, but who were really doing nothing more than exploiting the Corinthians.

The false teachers were welcomed in Corinth because of their eloquence and appearance of being relevant. The reality is that they have duped the Corinthians with “wisdom” which is in reality nothing but pagan foolishness. Paul mocks the false teachers one more time. *“But whatever anyone else dares to boast of—I am speaking as a fool—I also dare to boast of that.”* In what follows, Paul reveals a bit more about who these newly arrived false teachers are. Some of the false teachers were probably Judaizers, perhaps from Galatia or Antioch. These were regions wherein many ethnic Jews came to believe that Jesus was truly the Messiah, but who also held fast to the mistaken notion that Gentiles needed to live like ethnic Jews to be a true follower of Jesus. These men employed classic Greek rhetorical techniques (flowery speech) to convince the Corinthians that faith in Jesus Christ was not sufficient to justify sinners before God. As we saw in chapter 10, these men were teaching a different Jesus, a different spirit, as well as a different gospel from the one which Paul had taught them.

In verses 22-28 of chapter 11, we have one of the most remarkable passages in all the Bible, as Paul recounts why, if he *were* to boast, he has more reasons than all the false teachers combined. No one had ever endured as much as Paul had for the sake of the gospel. *“Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they offspring of Abraham? So am I. Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.”*

Paul is not complaining, nor whining. Nor is he bragging. As becomes clear in verses 29-30, Paul is making a point about the unwillingness of the false teachers to identify with the scandal of the cross. *“Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant? If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.”* The false teachers who call Paul “weak,” could never endure the things that he has. In fact, his weakness is the result of his calling from Christ to preach the gospel. More importantly, these false apostles preach and teach a false gospel as they do, precisely to avoid the kinds of suffering and persecution that Paul has endured. False teachers want to be relevant, and they don’t not offend anyone because their goal is popularity. They don’t want to face the wrath of unbelievers, nor endure persecution Paul describes for the cause of Christ. And yet, they call Paul weak and foolish? He has every right to be angry when these men seek to undermine his work in Corinth.

There is only one reason why Paul endures this. Because he has been called to endure this suffering by Jesus Christ. Suffering and persecution comes with his apostolic office. As Paul points out in verse 31, everything he has just recounted is true. He even swears an oath that not one word he has spoken has been made up. *“The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, he who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying.”* In fact, as recounted in Acts 9, after Paul had been converted and word spread throughout Damascus that the very man who had come to the city to arrest followers of Jesus, had himself become one of them, Paul had a harrowing escape from the city. *“At Damascus, the governor under King Aretas was guarding the city of Damascus in order to seize me, but I was let down in a basket through a window*

in the wall and escaped his hands.” Forced to hide in a basket to escape arrest is about as weak as it gets. Living in fear for his life has become a daily reality for Paul. Yes, he is weak. But that is not the point. This is what the false teachers cannot grasp. The gospel is not about human weakness or strength, nor is it about pagan “wisdom.” For Paul, it is all about the sufferings of Christ, for us, and in our place.

This brings us to the first ten verses of chapter 12 as Paul continues to boast (facetiously) about his own experience and his physical weakness. So, as he writes in verse 1, *“I must go on boasting.”* Paul is still playing the fool and mimicking the false teachers in Corinth who were boasting about their speaking skills and attracting followers by criticizing Paul—especially the accusation that Paul was weak. That Paul is speaking facetiously is clear when he says *“though there is nothing to be gained by it, I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord.”* Paul had been speaking about all the difficulties he had experienced—shipwreck and the rigors of first-century travel, the beatings, the sleepless nights, and the weight of caring for the churches. These are the very kind of hardships false teachers seek to avoid.

Paul now describes some of the miraculous things he has experienced. Again, none of the false teachers can come close to such things. All of them combined cannot match one of the things Paul has experienced. In verses 2-3, Paul begins recounting some of these things. *“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.”* Obviously, the man is Paul. It is also obvious that he is very uncomfortable even talking about these things, which explains his use of the “third person” (“a man”). But it is clear that Paul was given a vision of heaven, or paradise.

The word Paul uses for heaven is used elsewhere in the New Testament as that place where God dwells. In Luke 23:43, Jesus says to the dying thief on the cross, *“Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”* And then in Revelation 2:7, we read in the letter to the church in Ephesus *“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.”* Whatever paradise is—Paul had been there. The Apostle has been in the very presence of God, just like the dying thief, and just as all those who die in Christ. Paul refuses to say more about this experience, because he was forbidden from speaking about it, and likely because words could not adequately describe what he saw. In verse 4, Paul states, *“and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter.”*

Paul doesn’t understand the mechanics of his experience of Paradise—he doesn’t know whether he went to paradise bodily, or was given a vision of it. It really doesn’t matter. God knows how it happened. But Paul does tell us when this happened—fourteen years before writing 2 Corinthians. Since the Corinthian letters were written in the mid-fifties of the first century, this would put this visionary experience at some point between 40-42 A.D. Likely, this would have occurred when Paul was in Antioch or Tarsus, and before his first missionary journey during the events recounted in Acts 9:29-30, or perhaps in Acts 11:25-26. Paul says nothing about this vision anywhere else in his writings. He seems reluctant to talk about it because he was forbidden from speaking about what he heard. All we know for sure is that Paul was either given a vision of the presence of God, or else was bodily taken there. The purpose of this vision was to confirm his call as Apostle to the Gentiles and to prepare him for the suffering which lies ahead.

In verse 5, Paul writes, *“on behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses.”* In playing the fool to expose the foolishness of the false apostles, Paul can indeed boast about all that he has seen and experienced. But as far as he is concerned, it is more important to boast about his weakness, since it is in this he is most closely tied to the sufferings of Christ and the gospel he preaches. Paul’s message—given to him by Christ himself—is not tied to either his own suffering or experiences. Ironically, the gospel he preaches succeeds (creates faith) precisely because Paul lacks

eloquence and the powerful presence of these charismatic individuals now troubling the Corinthians. His gospel succeeds because the message of the cross is the power of God unto salvation. And because Paul is physically weak, and a poor speaker, he has no choice but reply upon the power of Christ. That is his point. It is all about Christ and the power of the gospel, not him.

But if the Corinthians still want to boast (Paul is almost chiding them), then he'll boast. But as he points out in verse 6, "*though if I should wish to boast, I would not be a fool, for I would be speaking the truth.*" Even though he has plenty to boast about, Paul will not indulge the Corinthians any more than he already has. "*But I refrain from it, so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me.*" Paul does not want to make himself the issue. Paul wants the Corinthians to focus upon the gospel which has been proclaimed to them. At the end of the day, none of this is about Paul. It is about Christ, the Holy Spirit, and the gospel, the very issues now under dispute in Corinth, thanks to the false teachers.

In fact, in verse 7, Paul reveals one of the great mysteries of his apostolic ministry—the so-called “thorn in the flesh.” “*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.*” The only thing not under dispute in this passage is the reason why God allowed this messenger of Satan to torment Paul—to keep him from being conceited. Having seen and done all the things Paul has seen and done, and given our sinful tendency to boast about such things and inflate our self-importance, Paul realizes why this thorn in the flesh has been given to him—to keep him humble.

The dispute about what this so-called thorn in the flesh actually entails is one of the biggest debates in Pauline theology, and given that Paul doesn't tell us, we have to make an informed guess. There are several possibilities. The first possibility is that this so-called thorn refers to the false teachers themselves, who were so openly critical of Paul and his abilities. There is some biblical precedence for Paul to speak like this. The Book of Numbers (33:55) and the prophecy of Ezekiel (28:34) speak of Israel's Canaanite oppressors as thorns in Israel's flesh. The false teachers are “thorns” like the Canaanites. This interpretation makes much sense in the context of 2 Corinthians and Paul's current troubles.

Another possibility is some sort of physical ailment. Paul speaks of having trouble with his eyesight in his letter to the Galatians (4:13-15; 6:11), and perhaps this was still an issue. Most commentators take Paul's reference to “the thorn” to refer to a physical illness because of his reference to “the flesh.” We simply do not know. Yet another interpretation is that Paul is speaking literally of a demonic power, which God allowed to afflict him in various ways (as with Job). All we can do is guess what Paul means, and my sense is that either of the first two possibilities make the most sense from what we can glean from elsewhere from Paul's biography. But we cannot eliminate the third option altogether.

Whatever it was, this thorn in his flesh troubled Paul greatly. As he says in verse 8, “*three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me.*” Given all that Paul had seen and experienced, you would think that he knew how to pray so as to have God answer his prayers as he wished—if that really were the purpose of prayer, to get what we want from God. But God's answer to Paul reveals that prayer is a not magical incantation (an abracadabra) which gets us what we want, if only we pray in just the right way, and for all the right motives (as many seem to imply). Paul says in verse 9, “*But he said to me, My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.*” As we saw in our Old Testament lesson, like Job, God allowed Paul to be tested by this messenger. It is also clear from Paul's comments here, that God has a reason for allowing this to happen to him. Paul must cling to the grace of God, because there is nowhere else to go. This is why Paul is allowed to suffer.

In fact, Paul goes on to say, “*therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.*” No doubt, at times, Paul felt like he was at the end of his rope, and that he

was hanging on by his fingertips. Paul also knew that, even if he was losing his grip on Christ, Christ had a firm hold of him. As Jesus himself says in John 10:28, “*I give [my sheep] eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.*” Sufficiently humbled by this thorn in the flesh, Paul realizes that these afflictions have a purpose, which he spells out in verse 10. “*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.*” Everything the false apostles said about Paul may have been true. It doesn’t matter. They cannot see God’s wisdom in the preaching of the cross because they love pagan foolishness. If Paul relied upon his own strength, cleverness of speech, and worldly wisdom, he would be no different from the false teachers—relying on human foolishness which passed for wisdom. But because of his weakness and lack of skill, all Paul has is Jesus Christ. Jesus’ grace is sufficient for Paul.

What, then, do we say by way of application?

It is tempting to look to biblical accounts like this one for answers to our own questions about suffering. Is there anything in Paul’s history that might explain my suffering? But we need to be careful here, and not look to the particulars of Paul’s “thorn in the flesh” for any explanation as to why God might call us to suffer. Paul’s personal history and apostolic calling are unique and completely unlike ours. We cannot say that when we suffer, God is sending us a “thorn in the flesh” to keep us humble. I am not Paul, nor am I an apostle who has seen the third heaven, or the risen Christ. My circumstances are completely different than Paul’s. God has his own purpose for me, whatever that might entail, just as he does for each of us.

But when we are called to suffer we can say exactly what Paul recounts as Christ’s words of consolation to him – “my grace is sufficient.” What does this mean? It means this—because Jesus died for our sins, we know that whatever happens to us arises within the mysterious will of God, and not in some sort of retributive punishment in which God punishes us because he is mad at us. We cannot say that God punishes us because we sin. The fact of the matter is that Jesus has already borne God’s wrath and anger toward our sin when he died for us on the cross. But Scripture does teach that God can and does discipline us when we are disobedient, because he is our heavenly father, and because he loves us.

Here is where we need to be careful. Such discipline might involve suffering. But God’s discipline might not lead to any form of visible suffering at all—it might even entail something like worldly success without any joy or pleasure. We are all different. God’s will for each of us is different. We cannot look at the sufferer and say to ourselves, “well, they are getting their just deserts.” Nor can we assume that any suffering we experience comes about because God is angry with us. We simply are not given an answer as to “why.” But we are told the same thing Paul was told. “My grace is sufficient for you.”

When we say that God’s grace is sufficient, we mean that God seeks our good, not our ill. Suffering is never enjoyable. God does not ask us to like it. But God uses our suffering in mysterious ways to accomplish his purposes. He even promises to turn it to our good. And as it was with Paul, it should be our desire that in our own weakness, affliction, and suffering, that Jesus Christ is exalted. Although it is hard for us rugged Americans to grasp, Paul’s words are still true. *When I am weak, then I am strong.* And the only reason we can say this, is because when we have nothing left, Jesus himself says to us “my grace is sufficient for you.” Look to the suffering and dying of Christ. When we look to the cross, then we know that Jesus means when he says “my grace is sufficient for you.”