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Epiphany 6

2 Corinthians 12:7-10

GOD'S GRACE IS ENOUGH

Three times Paul prayed about his suffering. Three times –why does he say that? Why is that significant? Whenever I suffer, I'm usually praying nonstop –not because I'm noble. I'm just pleading that God would give me some relief. Why does Paul single out these three times? It wasn't unusual for Paul to pray. If you read his thirteen epistles you get the impression that Paul was praying all the time and encouraging his fellow believers to pray. Paul usually described the content of his prayers. Paul's prayers were for spiritual things –that the believers in the churches he served would grow in their understanding of God's grace, that they would increase in holy living, that God would prepare them to meet Christ on the Last Day. But here in 2 Corinthians 12 it seems Paul remarked about something he didn't normally do: three times he deliberately prayed for himself personally and he

prayed concerning a physical need as opposed to a spiritual need. You see, he could have prayed for patience or endurance or insight as to God's purpose for his suffering. But in this case he directly requested that God simply take it away.

And what was God's answer? *My grace is sufficient for you.* God's grace is enough. That's the hardest lesson for us to learn and unfortunately can mostly be learned only through pain. But it's a lesson worth more than its weight in gold because this is the truth on which our whole salvation depends: God's grace is enough.

I suspect that in Paul's case, pride was a particular spiritual challenge. Paul describes himself in his early years: *a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless.* Here in 2 Corinthians 12 he admits he was given a thorn in the flesh *to keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations.* Paul, who could have boasted of establishing so many churches throughout Asia Minor, who could have boasted of all the things he had endured and suffered in his work for these congregations, was also granted by God a vision of heaven to encourage him. He says he was *caught up to*

Paradise. He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell.

Some Christians in Corinth grew uppity over the fact that God granted them the ability to speak in tongues. Imagine how Paul could have blown them all away with these extraordinary visions he had experienced from God.

But God popped Paul's bubble with the thorn of suffering. It wasn't light or easy. It was something miserable. He calls it a messenger of satan to torment him.

It could be that Paul was also concerned that his work was being hampered. Imagine him reasoning with the Lord, "Couldn't I do mission work much more efficiently on your behalf, Lord, if I weren't hobbled by this painful handicap?"

It could also be that the suffering was just hard. Paul was only human. There was another occasion when Paul writes that certain hardships made him and his companions despair even of life.

What is it for you? You see, I'm glad Paul didn't tell us what his thorn in the flesh was. Make no mistake, the Holy Spirit prevented him from labeling it. That's so you and I are able to apply this truth to ourselves. Whatever we are suffering, God's grace is enough for us also!

Paul even opens it up when he writes, *That is why for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties.*

What is it for you? Is it physical? Arthritis? Scar tissue on your colon from radiation? Is it something else? Something you've been teased about? Is it a sin you can't master. Something that if it were discovered it would ruin your career or your marriage or both? You've prayed and prayed about it but no help seems to come. Perhaps you are chained to debts. Or an inexpressible grief has struck you. Maybe it's an obsessive compulsive or a manic disorder. Or an emotional or trauma issue that never seems to resolve. Maybe it's a person in your life to whom you are duty bound but that person creates a constant burden. Is it the fear of being hated for being a Christian or working under the fear that if your faith comes out in any way you'll be fired from your job or ridiculed in the

classroom? Is it some shock or mess in your life or dread of what's to come that leaves you feeling powerless and vulnerable?

Satan torments us in all kinds of ways. But God permits it to happen. Not because God doesn't love you. Not because God isn't kind or good. God permits it so that you and I learn that His grace is enough.

You see, because our hearts and minds are so sinfully inclined, if everything is always going well for us we don't see ourselves as being helpless. We don't sense any pending doom. We're fine. We're good. And when the time comes, we'll likely be judged good enough for heaven, won't we? But trouble quickly pulls the curtain off that lie. Not only has sin made us truly helpless in this life, sin makes us even more helpless to get ourselves into heaven. God's grace and only God's grace is sufficient for that.

We need to turn to His grace and our suffering teaches us to do just that. In this way suffering prepares us for heaven already. The more we suffer, the more we are forced in our need and desperation to rely on God's grace to take care of everything. That what it means in

2 Corinthians 12 when God says, *My grace is sufficient for you for my power is made perfect in weakness.*

God's grace, His unexpected, unobligated kindness, moved Him to send forth His Son to this earth to save us. It is Christ's goodness and righteousness that saves us. Not ours. It is Christ's sufferings and death that save us. Not ours. It is Christ's resurrection from the dead that saves us. Not anything in us. We are weak. He is strong.

Just as we are completely dependent on God's grace for everything in this life, so we are also completely dependent on God's grace for our salvation. Not only did the Apostle Paul's suffering help to rescue him from the damning sin of pride, it also taught Paul to depend on God's grace even for his daily mission work. God would accomplish His purposes even without Paul's help. It did not all depend on Paul. This truth would be a great relief for Paul. But there was only one way Paul could learn it. Paul wrote, *Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. For when I am weak, then I am strong.* Not that Paul himself was strong but through his weakness, his suffering, God's grace would show itself evermore powerfully, evermore fully.

For this reason, it's not uncommon, to hear believers, like Paul, to say that even though something they suffered was terrible, they would not trade it for the world. Were it not for their suffering they would never have tasted the goodness of God's grace as sweetly as they do now.

Because of Christ's death on the cross you have a God who looks at you not as though He's still holding something against you, not with indifference, not with mere sentimentality either. God envelopes you with grace. It is in our suffering that we truly discover who God is –that mercy is His chief characteristic. Jesus said, *Blessed are the poor in spirit*, not the happy-go-lucky.

What relief to live and go about our daily activity under a continuous umbrella of forgiveness, grace and goodwill from God. We are not under His angry stare and furrowed brow. He does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. Grace. That's the air we breathe, the Spirit that moves us, the peace we enjoy.

God does not answer all our questions concerning our sufferings –why did God let this happen, why doesn't He take that away –even as He didn't answer everything for Paul. But He does promise us His grace, grace sufficient to save us, grace sufficient to meet every need, grace sufficient for us to trust Him in spite of our own doubts.

Grace! That's all that is necessary. And in Christ you have it abundantly.