

God's Grace Is Sufficient

2 Corinthians 12:7-10

by Michael G. Lilienthal

My dear Christian friends,

Many of you were present last week when I was ordained as pastor to serve you and your fellows at your sister congregation. I made certain promises. There were several paragraphs that took up what I promised, but the long and short of it is this: I promised to give you God's Word, to tell it to you directly, to give it to you straight. So today I'm going to do just that: I'm going to give it to you straight.

The life of a Christian is rough, patchy at best. Constant torment, difficulty, physical and emotional pain await. You've already experienced much of this. And I'm going to be honest, more is just around the corner. More suffering will come tomorrow. And more the next day. Then more next week. Then more next month, next year, and every year, every day, for the rest of your life. As a character in a great movie puts it, "Life is pain.... Anyone who says differently is selling something."¹

Of course, anything I just said can apply not only to Christians, but to all human beings. To some degree or another, every human being suffers throughout life. What makes Christians different? Why should Christians become the focus of our attention when it comes to pain and suffering? The reason is that Christians have the surest, the most certain coping mechanism.

¹ *The Princess Bride*, directed by Rob Reiner (1987; Los Angeles, CA: Twentieth Century Fox, 2009), DVD.

Think of suffering this way: if everyone in the world suffers, if we can't escape it, then the aim of humanity is to find the path of least resistance, to get through life with as little suffering as possible, or at least to be able to cope with the suffering that comes the best we can. Well, there's the point where Christians win that game. That's because our coping is not just to get us through another day, not just to get us a second of happiness, but the way we cope gets us into an eternity of happiness. Our hope is not in this life but the next. Paul wrote in his previous letter to the Corinthians: "If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied" (1 Cor. 15:19).

Christians may indeed have wealth and comfort in this life. We may be blessed with many temporal blessings; these must not be ignored. But our focus is not on these blessings. We are not directed to be concerned with these material things, but Jesus directs us instead in what might be called fighting words: "Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me" (Matt. 10:37). Our hope and our coping is such that we would sooner throw all our possessions into the fire than lose our eternal gift, the one thing needful, that which is sufficient. But it's even more than that. If it came to a point wherein we did in fact have to sacrifice everything, and not just our things but our reputations, the wellness of our bodies, and even our families and friends, then because of that which is sufficient for us, we would be able to sing about it. Historians remarked with awe that the first-century Christians who were thrown into the mouths of lions in the Colosseum sang hymns together before their deaths. Even more recently,

Martin Luther wrote a hymn which proclaims, "And take they our life, / Goods, fame, child, and wife, / Let these all be gone" (ELH 250:3)!

Christian living, in a way, is ironic living. So many things are turned on their heads because of our faith. One of those things is that when we suffer, when we are in pain, when we are weak, we can rejoice, rather than despair. God's grace is sufficient for us,

I. So We Are Made Strong in Weakness

Look at Paul's example: Arguably the greatest apostle, who was allowed to see a glimpse of heaven, as he states just a few verses earlier than our text, that he "was caught up into paradise...and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter" (2 Cor. 12:3-4). Try to comprehend the great gift Paul had been given here: he saw unspeakable wonders, which no one living had ever seen. We may surmise that he saw many of the things that John later beheld and recorded in the book of Revelation. But all this was tempered, for he was given "a thorn...in the flesh." The man who received so great a gift, also received a great torment. Think of this thorn as a sliver - a tiny piece of wood or metal inserted under the skin, painful and impossible to ignore, *distracting*, even. Paul doesn't tell us exactly what this thorn was. There are plenty of theories about it, from physical ailments like near-blindness, scoliosis, epilepsy, rheumatism, or leprosy; to mental problems like depression; to spiritual deficiencies such as pet sins or blasphemous thoughts. The bottom line is, we don't know.

But there's a blessing in not knowing: for each of us knows his own personal thorn or thorns, which makes us able to see Paul's example and find ourselves in just

the same situation. Think about your thorns. Think about those things that you would plead with God to remove, those personal struggles, those specific ailments that make life most difficult, those curses that have you trapped. It's jammed under your skin and you can't get it out. It's a constant itch, sometimes so painful you can't even move or think of anything besides the pain. Paul also describes his as "a messenger of Satan to harass" him. "Harass" is an inadequate translation of the Greek, which literally means that this messenger repetitively and unceasingly pummeled him with its fists, like an annoyingly persistent little imp or leprechaun who dances around him, punching him left and right and ducking out of the way so he's impossible to catch. Think of your own trials, your own messengers of Satan who appear suddenly and without warning and knock you to the ground – in grief, in depression, in physical pain, in spiritual weakness, or any other sort of anguish.

And then think of how Paul got through it: he asked God to take it away, but God instead said, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." It's *sufficient*. That means God's grace is *enough* for you. It's all we need. Notice, Paul asked for his thorn to be removed, taken away. God's reply: "Why do you need it removed? You have my grace."

And he says, "My power is made perfect in weakness." A more accurate translation would be, "My power is brought to its finish in weakness." God's power is active in accomplishing things in us, and when we are brought down to the depths of weakness, then God's perfect power demonstrates itself as the surest foundation for our faith. Then that task is finished, for it is then that we have attained all the blessings God

has intended for us. God wants us to be saved. We are saved by trusting in him. The greatest temptation of humanity, and man's greatest idol (even since the beginning) is himself. Remember how the serpent tempted Adam and Eve: with the promise that they would be "like God" (Gen. 3:5). When it comes down to it, all sin is really one: the idolatry of self.

So if our idol is toppled like the Philistine Dagon (1 Sam. 5), if it can be shown to bleed, if it demonstrates weakness, then we can no longer trust in it. We must find a surer foundation. This is the benefit of our thorns, our troubles: they teach us humility. Humility teaches us to have faith outside ourselves, in the surest foundation there is. Through our faith, then, God makes us mighty. Like Paul, therefore, we can be certain of two things: First, our own weakness; Second, that God's grace is sufficient.

The idea of a messenger of Satan reminds us of the history of Job. The beginning of that book finds Satan in God's court, and Satan tells God that if Job's blessings were removed, he would certainly curse God to his face (Job 1:11). So God allows Satan to torment Job, to take away his blessings, to afflict him with disaster and disease. Then, when Job is brought to his weakest point, God steps in and proves his power, so that Job's faith in him is once again strengthened.

How is this practically applied in our lives? It doesn't mean that we go around smiling all the time. It doesn't mean that when we stub our toe, instead of exclaiming, "Ow!" we instead shout, "God be praised!" Our strength does not come from our personal fortitude under duress. That brings us back to the same problem. The fact is that we can't be strong. We can't keep ourselves from being in pain when it strikes. We

can't hold back the tears. God doesn't ask us to. He doesn't say, "You'll be fine. Just get through it." What does he say? "My grace is sufficient for you." There's no call for us to suffer in silence. That's turning us back inward once more, causing us to try to find some way for us to survive within ourselves. Instead, let's come to God. Do as the psalmist today: "Hear, O LORD, when I cry aloud; / be gracious to me and answer me!" (Ps. 27:7). When pain, grief, sorrow, or temptation strikes, shout these or similar words to God. He will hear, as he heard Paul: perhaps not to remove the thorn, but at the very least to assure you, "My grace is sufficient for you." Finding that we can no longer rely on ourselves, we become strong, for we see that we can boast in our God.

II. So We Boast in Our God

Think how easily pride and hubris could slip into the mind of one with the authority to minister the Gospel: "I hold souls in my hand! I have God's power to distribute where I will! I have the very keys which lock and unlock the gates of heaven!" I speak of Paul in this regard, who was blessed with that vision of paradise I mentioned before, something no one else was privileged to see; and I speak of myself, a called and ordained minister of the Gospel, someone who has been given a measure of spiritual authority; but I also speak of every single Christian. The Keys and the Gospel have been given to all Christians, just as all Christians were told, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations," and "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld" (Matt. 28:19; John 20:22-23). Think of the power you have. Think how easy it would be to let it go to your head. Think of the certainty you have: You have faith in the one and only

Jesus Christ, the one who died on the cross to take away your sins, and you are certain that that is true. We Christians have the truth, and no one but Christians have it. Think how easy it would be to let that go to our heads.

So we are reminded now not to boast in ourselves. Instead, Paul says, "I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses!" It is our weaknesses that drive us to boast, to tell others. And Paul says why: "so that the power of Christ may rest upon me." There is something very significant in these words that I'd like to share. The Greek word which is translated "may rest upon" is ἐπισκηνώση. Ἐπισκηνώση means literally "may spread its tent over." Paul's hope is that Christ's power would spread its tent over him. And there are three shades of meaning to this. I think theologically we must hold all three of them to know what Paul really means.

The first meaning is communicated in our translation, which hopes that "the power of Christ may rest upon" Paul. If a tent is spread over some ground, then the person who owns the tent intends to rest on that ground. Paul therefore wishes to be the ground on which Christ rests. He wishes that his heart would become Christ's dwelling place. This therefore comes to mean that Paul is given faith in Christ, for Christ dwells in his heart, and this means that Paul is personally saved.

The second meaning, which is ultimately the same as the first, is that Christ's power comes and hides Paul's weaknesses, covering him as a wide tent would. This makes him acceptable in God's sight, justified and saved, so that when God looks at Paul, he sees no sin or failing but Christ's perfect keeping of the Law. This again means that Paul is personally saved on account of what Christ did on the cross.

The third meaning is somewhat different: Christ's power envelops Paul, and is therefore made the most visible thing about him, so that when Paul presents himself before men, he is really presenting Christ. And this is what "boasting in weakness" actually means: not that I'm so full of weaknesses that God must love me more, not a Complaining Game or kvetching competition, but in fact that we boast in Christ. The prophet Jeremiah records God's words: "Let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth" (Jer. 9:24). Paul himself paraphrases these words in his letters to the Corinthians. When we boast in our weaknesses it is to move ourselves into the background and Christ into the foreground.

And this is another thing that Paul said in his previous letter to the Corinthians: "We preach Christ crucified," and he admitted that this message was "a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles" (1 Cor. 1:23). For who in the world would think it a wise thing to hope in a God who could die? Yet this is my promise to you, that I preach Christ crucified, for it is on that cross that that Christ, that Jesus took upon himself all your sins, so that you might be given all the blessings of salvation and eternal life, so that you can see in this "Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor. 1:24). My concern is not that I have a good-sized study or a printer that works, not that I am sure to have a cup of coffee at the end of every service. My concern is for your souls, for your faith, that you hold tightly to Christ, the one who saved you from the condemnation your sins deserved. Look to that Christ, and receive the blessed comfort of salvation.

All this is the blessed comfort God means for us when he tells us, just as he told St. Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you." I won't mince words with you. I'll tell it to you straight, because that's what you've called me to do: God' grace, his χάρις, his undeserved favor and giving of every spiritual gift to those who deserved the very opposite, gifts including forgiveness of all sin, new life, and salvation, all this is sufficient.

Amen.