

# Grace is Sufficient

## 2 Corinthians 12:2-10

This passage is part of what is called Paul's "fool's speech," (11:1 through 12:11). In this speech, he is trying to convince the Corinthians that his ministry is different and superior to the "super-apostles," an unknown group that seems to consist of rival missionaries to Paul who execute their ministry with elegant speech, boasting of revelations and visions, and entering into some sort of monetary relationship with the Corinthians. Paul had ministered among them without accepting a pastor's salary. In the first part of the speech, in 11:1-15, Paul argued that he was in no way inferior to this group and even accused them of deceitful work and "disguising themselves as apostles of Christ" (11:13). The last part of the speech is our passage.

Paul said he was going to boast about visions and revelations. However, rather than boasting about his own visions and revelations, he refused to credit them to himself so that he would not boast about them, like the boasting that the superapostles apparently did on a regular basis. But Paul went on to boast in a slightly different way. Paul talked about someone he claimed to know who was caught up in the third heaven and into paradise. There he heard and experienced things that "no mortal is permitted to repeat" (v. 4); it was enough for Paul to refer to these events without repeating the specific details of the experiences.

Then Paul told the Corinthians about his "thorn in the flesh." No one really knows what this thorn might have been. The guesses, and they really are guesses, range from psychological (e.g., sexual temptation [current throughout the Middle Ages], pangs of conscience over persecution of the

early church, or humiliation for not getting more Jews to believe him) to external opposition (e.g., the superapostles or other rival missionary groups, those who oppose him in Corinth, or rough treatment by his enemies) to physical illness or disability (e.g., pains in the head, epilepsy, or ophthalmia). Whatever the precise nature of this "thorn in the side," Paul saw it as functioning to remind him that his power did not come from himself; instead, it comes from the Lord.

Paul went one step further in claiming that his understanding of his suffering came from the Lord, as well: "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness" (v. 9). Paul claimed a sort of process by which one is perfected through suffering. In the rest of the speech he gave his clearest and most direct statement of the relationship between power and weakness. He claimed that boasting in weakness actually resulted in the indwelling presence of the power of Christ. So, unlike the superapostles who boasted of a power demonstrated by fancy speech and powerful visions, Paul boasted of his weaknesses, not out of false humility but as a way of demonstrating that his power could come only from Christ. His ministry was truly manifest in weakness and suffering, so it must be from Christ, because it was like Christ's sufferings. Paul finished the passage by explaining his contentedness with his weakness, a contentedness that was present only because he knew that "whenever *he was weak*, then *he was strong*." **Stephen**

### **P. Ahearne-Kroll**

Last weekend I attended the Women's retreat at Crystal. Our speaker was Marilyn Williams of South Carolina, the International Disciples Women's Ministries president. She told a story on Saturday that demonstrated for me about God's sufficient grace. In January of this year she was cleaning up after cleaning a patient's teeth. In the process she obtained a needle prick.

She went through the medical protocol for such a situation. She also knew her patient had AIDS. When she went to get her medication she was told it would be over \$2,000, which she knew she would get back after the worker's compensation claim was settled, but on a Friday evening she, nor anyone she knew had that kind of money on hand. Marilyn prayed and after asking her to wait, the pharmacy assistant gave her the medication for free. He had opened two different bottles of the medication to give her the initial dose and therefore could not tell the medication. She told us that God's grace was sufficient! When her son came to get her she told him to take her quickly to the parking lot. Naturally the son was concerned, but Marilyn explained that we just wanted to give God praise and she was not sure that the customers in the store would understand. Two weeks before Marilyn came to Michigan she had her last blood test and she is HIV and AIDS free! God's grace was and is indeed stuffiest!

Sometimes we get confused about our Christian witness, we think we have to give some miracle story of what God did for us. But what we really have to tell is that God's grace has been sufficient, even when times were difficult. Paul said: "For when I am weak, then I am strong" (v. 10b RSV): this is Paul's theological point in a nutshell. "But what is his weakness?" Karl Barth said: "Simply what remains of his Christian existence after it is stripped of the religious experience of which he could boast for good reason and in truth, but that meant for Paul insults, hardships, persecutions, calamities for Christ's sake (v. 10). There he saw the *power* of Christ dwelling in him; there he knew himself to be *strong*; there is what he *boasted* about." **Garrett Green**

Too often we want to be strong – but it is in our weakness that Christ gives us strength to endure. It is easy for all of us to fall into the trap of being self-professed "super-Christians." Like Paul, we sometimes feel we must respond

to claims of special revelations and visions, especially when others are making such claims. Paul, who years earlier had been blessed with a profound vision of the heavenly realm, was clearly tempted to go toe to toe with the superapostles by offering vivid descriptions of his own (vv. 2-4). But he knew that a "my vision was better than your vision!" shouting match would only concede his opponents' argument that inward spiritual experience was a valid basis for religious authority.

Our inward experiences deepen our faith, but they do not constitute a basis for our authority within the church. That authority rests not upon what we have experienced in an inward, private way, but on the manner in which we are living the gospel in our families, in our community, in our church.

Paul boasted not of his experiences of wonder, but rather of his human weakness, his thorn. As is true in so many dimensions of faith, there is a paradox here: we express humility before God by boasting of our weakness because the love, power, and glory of God are made manifest through the good we are able to accomplish in spite of that weakness. Rather than describe our personal encounter with the risen Christ in transcendent clouds of glory, our calling is to *be* the presence of Christ to others. But we can, and should, speak humbly and honestly of our weaknesses and limitations, bragging not of our own accomplishments, but of what God is able to accomplish through our lives, despite our weakness. **John T. Mcfadden**

Paul reminds us that being a member of the church is no guarantee that we will be excused from trials and difficulties, in fact, just the opposite is probable and may be true – however, God is with us and give us sufficient grace for the living of each day and the ministry to which each of us has been called. God only ask us to endure and give Him glory!

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