

“Walking in the Power of Weakness”

2Corinthians 12:1-10

September 5, 2021

Series: *Sufficient Grace for Every Trial*

Scripture Reading: 2 Corinthians 12:1-10

Over the past 25 years of ministry, God has been doing 2 high level things in my life. On the one hand, He has granted just enough moments of fruitfulness to train my heart to truly believe in the power of His grace and the sufficiency of His word. The Spirit really does work through the word to affect true change—to give life! On the other hand, God has granted enough weakness, enough hardships and even failures to fully convince me that I have no personal effectiveness apart from God’s intervening grace and power.

And regardless of which way God is working, Satan comes to tempt me. When things are going well he makes a subtle suggestion that I should be pleased with myself. The temptation is to respond to God’s gracious working with pride. When things look gloomy, Satan tempts me to be discouraged and despair: “You know, Ty, you really haven’t accomplished much, have you. You really don’t measure up to the task before you.” And in fact, he’s right. I can’t claim any fruit for myself. I don’t measure up to the task. But what’s the temptation? To shift my focus from God’s ability to my inability rather than using my inability as a launching pad for faith in God. The temptation is to undermine my confidence in God by a preoccupation with self. Self-exaltation and self-pity: the two ugly bedfellows of pride. Now take note of this: God is working for my sanctification, specifically humility and faith, while Satan is seeking to spoil the work of God in my life by tempting me to pride and unbelief.

I don’t think this is unique to me. It is simply the outworking of the testimony of God’s word in my life as in all our lives. It is a reflection of two truths that Jesus gave us to keep our lives in a godly balance—and this will explain what God has been up to in your life in the past week. In **John 15:5** He said, “*apart from Me you can do nothing.*” But He also said in **Matthew 19:26**, “*with God all things are possible.*” Apart from Him...with Him. Notice that

the difference between utter barrenness and abundant fruitfulness is where we stand in relationship to God. And God’s role in our life is so significant that He will do two things. First, He will grant us situations so hard and disappointing, seasons so seemingly ineffective that we will be thoroughly convinced that apart from Him we can do nothing—can’t lean on our giftedness, education, experience, or even maturity. If God does not intervene, the ship is going down! Secondly, He will grant us situations so impossible to work in ways that reveal His grace and providence so undeniably that we will truly believe that with God all things are possible.

2Corinthians 12 is Paul’s testimony to this very work of God in his life, his testimony of embracing the weakness of his humanity as the means by which God would display the power and sufficiency of His grace.

Here’s where 2 Cor 12:1-10 is taking us: ***Rather than resenting our afflictions, we can rejoice that they expose our human weakness as a platform through which the sufficiency of God’s grace is revealed to exalt Christ.*** This will only make sense if the goal of your life is nearness to Christ rather than freedom from pain or trouble. If the goal of your life is to be as near to God as you can and for Him to work through your life, then no affliction or circumstance can essentially undermine your purpose.

Our passage has two major parts. I’m going to summarize the first half (vs 1-6) as concisely as I can so that we can drill down into vs. 7-10. And this is what Paul intends for us to do. He brings up the matter of a vision he had 14 years earlier to tell us not to dwell on it but rather on the grace of God as revealed through his suffering for the gospel.

Here’s the background. For the past several chapters Paul has been talking about boasting. There is a right way to boast—boasting in the Lord and the sufficiency of His grace. Hence, Paul said in 10:17, “*He who boasts is to boast in the Lord.*” Therefore, the wrong way to boast is boasting in self, in man, in anything that we do not attribute to the gracious hand of God. And so Paul said in 11:30, “*If I have to boast, I will boast of what pertains to my weakness.*” Why? Because highlighting his weakness was a means of highlighting God’s grace working through his weakness.

Paul found himself in this awkward position of having to establish his own credibility (which could come across as boasting) in response to the slander of the false apostles who said he (and therefore his message) was inferior to them. Last week in chapter 11, Paul refuted their claims that he was inferior in his status as a Hebrew (11:22). Now, in chapter 12 he is refuting their claim that he is inferior because he has not had the same kind of ecstatic experiences they boast of like visions and revelations. Paul refutes that claim in vs. 1-6 by setting the record straight. He mentions an exceedingly significant vision he received of heaven. Yet *he recounts the vision in ways that intentionally make it anticlimactic*:

- First, he speaks of it in 3rd person: “I know a man” who was caught up to heaven (2). He’s speaking about himself yet detaches himself from it to minimize any impression it makes of himself.
- Second, He doesn’t pretend to explain how it took place (was it just a vision or was in literally in heaven). Twice he says emphasizes that only “God knows” (2-3). Furthermore, Paul would not disclose what he saw or heard. His experience was meant for personal edification, not to poise himself as superior to others.
- Finally, he only mentions it because it is necessary (1) for him to speak the truth (6) on this matter to refute the false teachers. There is a way to report what is true about one’s experience without making it self-exalting. This is what good/humble missionaries do on furlough. They tell us what *God* has done through their ministry. The **key phrase** in vs. 1-6 is in vs. 5: “*on my own behalf I will not boast.*” In other words, I will not leverage this experience/vision to my own advantage or to exalt myself. Why? Vs. 6: “so that no one will credit me with more than he sees in me.” Namely, God’s grace working through His weakness. (“He must increase; I must decrease”—Jn 3:30)

So, Paul turns our attention to his weakness and afflictions as servants of grace in vss. 7-11. There are some essential lessons for us to learn here.

1. **God-given affliction is necessary for Christ-exalting humility (7).**

[vs 7] This “thorn in the flesh” is a particular affliction. We don’t know exactly what it is and that’s not the point. What is important is that this

thorn or affliction had a God-given purpose. And Paul states that purpose twice in vs. 7: “*to keep me from exalting myself.*” God uses affliction to keep us humbly dependent on his grace—the very grace which is the only source of abundant life. The greatest peril to be avoided in your life is not suffering, pain, or even death. The greatest peril to be avoided in self-exaltation; pride which produces self-reliance and keeps you from God.

The good news is that all suffering in this life is susceptible to God’s grace. God’s grace can permeate any and all suffering in this life. This is how Paul could refer to God as the God of all comfort in chapter 1. Those who humble themselves before God will experience His grace, regardless of their suffering. But self-exaltation is an assault against the very refuge of God Himself whom we need more than money, health, or human relationships. Affliction is sent to position us in a place of humility under the waterfall of God’s grace.

2. **Seasons of affliction sent for our sanctification are also vulnerable to Satan’s assaults of deception (7).**

This comes from a curious phrase in vs. 7: “there was given me a thorn in the flesh, *a messenger of Satan to torment me.*” Notice, this is a severe affliction (torment), Satan has a hand in it, but God is sovereign over it. We know that the thorn comes from God, not Satan, because Paul emphatically tells us the primary purpose of the affliction—make and keep Paul humble. That is never Satan’s agenda. Satan’s agenda is always to make you prideful (whether with self-reliance or self-pity). He never wants to keep you from exalting yourself because God favors the humble. So what’s going on here?

God in His sovereignty will use even His enemies to accomplish His purposes (Assyrians and Babylonians). Let me remind you that there are always at least two wills at work in your circumstances. God is at work to strengthen your faith and refine your character, while Satan is at work in the same circumstances that God is sovereignly orchestrating, to tear down your faith and character.

This is best illustrated in Job’s life. Round 1: God said to Satan, have you considered my servant Job? He’s a righteous man. Satan said, he wouldn’t

be if he lost all that he has. God said, you are permitted to take what he has, but you can't touch Job himself. So Satan destroys Job's wealth and takes his children. Round 2: God said, have you considered my servant Job. He still holds fast to his integrity. Satan says, its only because still has his life. God said, you can touch him, but you cannot take his life. So Satan strikes Job with a bitter illness. What we learn from the book of Job is that God is sovereign over Satan's hand in our suffering. And while Satan is seeking to undo us with his evil intent, God's purposes are holy as He wills to strength our faith and refine our character. This is what was happening in Paul's life, and it happens in our lives today.

Based on both Job's experience and Paul's, we can say that *two things are true of every affliction or conflict in our life*:

- a. Every affliction or conflict is an opportunity for you to grow and glorify God by walking in His all-sufficient grace. This is where a response of faith will take you (exalting Christ).
- b. Every affliction or conflict is also vulnerable to Satan's temptation of self-absorption. This is where a response of unbelief will take you (exalting self).

The question is, will you align your will with God's by responding with faith in the sufficiency of God's grace to work all things together for good and to shape you into the likeness of Christ, or will you align your will with Satan's by turning inward to indulge self? So how do we take hold of God's grace...?

3. **Prayer is always the right response to affliction (8).**

[vs. 8] Prayer (and repeated prayer) for God's deliverance is always appropriate. Suffering itself is not intrinsically good. The fact that God works out good purposes through affliction, does *not* mean that we should seek it or not seek to be delivered from it. So when affliction comes we pray for God's intervention: "Lord, I pray for your deliverance and until the moment of Your rescue, work out your deeper purposes in my life." By the way, we may not know, understand, or see the full outworking of God's plan and our prayers. Job didn't. And that's ok. Just be faithful to exercise your faith and God will be faithful to work it out.

4. **No severity of affliction or amount of suffering can over-draft the supply of God's grace (9).**

We need to hear God's answer to Paul's prayer in vs. 9: "*My grace is sufficient for you...*" It is in plenty supply to sustain you and make your life fruitful.

One of the reasons God's grace is sufficient is because His sovereignty is insurmountable. Don't miss this. When you turn to God for His grace, even Satan's wily schemes will be turned to your advantage as God grants you humility, grace, and comfort all the while training your senses with the sweetness and sufficiency of His word. Beloved, when you pursue the Lord, even in a desert wasteland, you cannot be ultimately lassoed by anyone or anything else but God's grace.

5. **Our weakness (human frailty, limited ability) is the stage upon which Christ is exalted as God's all-sufficient grace works in and through us (9).**

Vs. 9: "*My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.*" What does this mean? When you grasp your weakness and inability in a given situation and turn to God and pray with utter dependence on His grace, His power (perfect power) works through you.

So, your goal is to never lose sight of your personal inability apart from God to affect true change and to never lose sight of God's unlimited ability to work in all things. *Apart from Christ I can do nothing but with Him all things are possible!* Does this mean we are going to see a lot of miracles? Not necessarily. God's intervention sometimes comes through supernatural deliverance but more often it comes through the supernatural grace to endure our trouble so that we can reap the full benefits of the sanctifying power of God's presence.

6. **Our comprehension of the sufficiency of God's grace will be revealed in a changed perspective that no longer resents our weakness, limitations, afflictions, or need to depend on God, but rather rejoices and rests in the opportunity for the power of Christ to be displayed (9b-10).**

This would take supernatural grace, wouldn't it? Yet, listen to the trail Paul is blazing here: "*Mostly gladly, therefore, I will boast about my weaknesses [inadequacy, ordinariness, inability, my need for God and His grace] so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. There is an abiding power that comes*

through faith and dependence on God. This is why we *pray* rather than appealing to positive thinking therapy. The problem with the kind of positive thinking promoted in the world and so much of the church, is that it's an attempt to maintain control. Positive thinking is man's doing. What we need is not more willpower. What we need is to truly surrender to God in prayer (opening the door for Him to work) so that His grace can flow in.

[vs. 10] Perhaps the best response to vs. 10 is to pray: *"Lord, there is nothing in this world that could make us satisfied or content in insults, distresses, persecutions or difficulties, short of divine grace. We ask not to be content with our circumstances but to be so content in Christ that no circumstance can jar the anchor of our hope in God. Grant us sufficient weakness to walk in the sufficient strength of Your grace, until Christ is exalted in us in life and in death. Amen.*

Communion:

The cross is the greatest display of God's sovereignty turning suffering into salvation. Even though Satan's hand was at work in a thousand ways to destroy the Son of God and those around him, God worked through the weakness of human flesh, through the afflictions of Christ in the flesh, to display the mighty power of God and to release the sufficiency of His grace to all who believe.

--Confess obvious sins and pride behind them

--Can we come to the Lord's table to rejoice in the grace that Christ has supplied through His afflictions, and yet cling to resentment for the afflictions we must bear in following Him?

- Bread: *"the Lord Jesus in the night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it, and said, "This is My body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of Me. In the same way He took the cup also, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me." (1 Cor 11:23-24).*

This bread represents not only the sinless life of Jesus, but also a life afflicted by sinners. No affliction could be greater than the judgement and wrath He bore for our sin and no greater grace provided than through His death for us.

- Cup: **Isa. 53:3-6**

Smitten of God. Afflicted by God. Bearing the affliction of our sin, Christ's blood has forever bound His children to the infinite grace of God. This is our boast.

Benediction: 2Cor 13:14

The sufficiency of God's grace does not mean that your journey is meant for just you and God alone. God often funnels His grace to us through fellow believers. We will be available to pray with you following the service.