

July 23, 2006
Pentecost 7

"My Grace Is Sufficient for You"

2 CORINTHIANS 12: 7-10

T*o keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. ⁸ Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. ⁹ But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. ¹⁰ That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*

You are interviewing for a job. The person doing the interview says, "Tell me more about yourself." You proceed to describe your strengths. Then to be honest you feel compelled to share your weaknesses. It has been a long time since I have interviewed for a job, but if I remember correctly that is not what you want to do if you apply for a job. You need to make the most of your strengths and draw as little attention as possible to your weaknesses.

That is not what the Apostle Paul did with the people in Corinth who were criticizing him for the way he conducted his gospel ministry. He talked about his strengths, specifically the amazing revelations that had been given to him by the Lord. He reminded them that fourteen years ago he was caught up into the third heaven and heard things revealed to him directly by Jesus. These special revelations were hardly the mark of an inferior apostle who was not fit for the ministry. At the same time Paul also shared with these people a weakness that he had in his life, a thorn in the flesh from Satan that tormented him. This weakness was actually a blessing because it provided an opportunity for the Lord to give him strength and teach him further dependence on the grace of God that rescued him from darkness and brought him into the light.

Tell me about yourself. What are your strengths? What are your weaknesses? You have a problem that just won't go away. You have fallen asleep at night praying fervently, "Lord Jesus help me." Or you may also have some weaknesses or troubles that you have lived with all your life. They almost seem to be part of who you are. You wish they could be taken away from you. You have asked the Lord to remove the problem. The answer that keeps coming back to you again and again is not, "Yes" and not "No" and not even "Wait awhile." The answer that comes to you is the same one that came to the Apostle Paul, "My Grace Is Sufficient for You."

The thorns of life will afflict you

We do not know what Paul was referring to when he writes about his "Thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me." We know it was bad because he says, "Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me." How interesting. Paul was given the power to heal people of diseases and even raise a person from the dead, but he could not put his

hand over the thorn in the flesh and make it disappear.

There have been various speculations on what the thorn in the flesh was. Some of the earliest Christian writers such as Tertullian suggested Paul had severe headaches. Perhaps you know someone with these very bad migraine headaches that do not go away. Another early Christian, John Chrysostom, nicknamed the "Golden Throat" because of his outstanding sermons, said he thought it was persecution. Martin Luther thought Paul was referring to spiritual trials. Other suggestions are bad eyesight, malaria and epilepsy. Maybe it is good we do not know what he is referring to exactly. This allows us to apply this text to our thorns in life that we have asked the Lord to remove from our lives.

Paul mentions that this thorn in the flesh was a messenger from Satan to torment him. The Lord is not the one who gives us problems and troubles, because the Lord is the source of good and not evil as we sing in one of our responses from the Psalms, "O taste and see that the Lord is good. Blessed are they who take refuge in him." There are troubles that do come to us in life because we are not living in a perfect world. Some children are born with handicaps and defects, not because God is punishing the parents, but because Adam's fall into sin has resulted in a world that now lives under the curse of sin. The reason some of you have to make numerous trips to the doctor recently is not because God is punishing you. It is the direct result of living in a world that is under the shadow of death. We are dying people. Some go quickly and others go slowly. The longer we live the more contact we have with the thorns and thistles of this world. The book of Ecclesiastes says, "Moreover, no man knows when his hour will come: As fish are caught in a cruel net, or birds are taken in a snare, so men are trapped by evil times that fall unexpectedly upon them."

There are times that the devil is also in the thorns, creating even more pain and difficulty for the person who must suffer. So it was with Paul. It was a messenger of Satan to torment him. The word for torment is a strong word meaning, boxing or buffeting the side of the head. That is what they did to Jesus before they took him to the cross, boxed his ears, hit him on the side of the head. When Satan gets into the thorn, he can drive it deeply into the Christian, causing them to cry out in pain to the Lord and plead over and over again as the woman did with Jesus when her daughter was tormented by an evil spirit, "Lord have mercy on me."

As the saying goes, there is a silver lining in every cloud. Paul saw the good that came out of this thorn in the flesh. "To keep me from being conceited, because of these surpassing great revelations, there was given me a thorn in the flesh." In Galatians Paul talks about going to Arabia after the Lord appeared to him and brought him to faith on the road to Damascus. It was there that he received these special revelations from Jesus that he also described as being caught up in Paradise. It would have been so easy for Paul to think he was superior to other believers or other leaders in the church because of these outstanding revelations from the Lord.

When the Lord pours out a special blessing in your life, it is so easy to lose our perspective and think that somehow our goodness and our greatness is the reason for this blessing. That is certainly true when you are given material blessings, or some special success in making money, or doing well at your job, or even some special gift in the church such as teaching, leading others, or the grace of giving. The problems of life can turn out to

be blessings as they keep us from thinking too much about ourselves or being critical of others. These problems can actually lead us to lean more on the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The grace of God will not fail you

Paul prayed for the Lord to remove this thorn in the flesh. "Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me." He did not just casually ask the Lord to take away the thorn. He pleaded with the Lord the way we plead with the Lord, crying out as people did with Jesus when they said simply yet with firm conviction, "Lord help me." Jesus said, "Ask and it shall be given to you, seek and you shall find, knock and the door shall be open to you." Think of the times you have faced major problems and pleaded with the Lord as Paul did.

Paul did not get the answer he was hoping to receive. He did not see his thorn in the flesh removed, so he could go on in life without this affliction. Instead, the Lord spoke directly to Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you. My power is made perfect in weakness." "My grace is sufficient for you." This word "sufficient" is used in the account of Jesus feeding 5000 people with five barley loaves and two small fish. A large crowd of people followed Jesus up the side of the mountain to hear him teach, thousands of people. Most of them were so interested in being with Jesus they did not bring enough food along with them for the day. Jesus asked Philip, "Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?" In frustration Philip responded, "Eight month's wages would not buy enough bread for each one to have a bite." What a large crowd? Even if they had enough money, they would not be able to find enough food in the markets and vendors to feed such a crowd. Even Costco would not have enough bread in its bakery to feed that many people. That word "enough" is the word Jesus uses to assure Paul, "My grace is sufficient, my grace is enough for you." And you know the rest of the story. Jesus used five small barley loaves and two small fish to feed 5000 people and they had more than enough. There were twelve baskets left over.

My grace is sufficient for you. When we read these words that Jesus spoke to Paul, we know the same words were also meant for us, especially when the pain of a thorn in the flesh becomes unbearable. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ was certainly sufficient for us when it came to solving our problem of sin. The thorns of this life, the pain we experience, are nothing compared to the pain that could be ours because of our sin that makes us unacceptable to our God. Jesus himself warned us about a place of eternal suffering, eternal torment, eternal fire, the place where the worm does not die. How sufficient is the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ in removing the pain of eternal death? Ephesians 1:7 says, "In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins in accordance with the riches of his grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding." The same grace of our Lord Jesus that provided sufficient pardon and cleansing also provides sufficient strength and help to make it through this life, even if the thorn may be very painful.

Notice Jesus also said, "For my power is made perfect in your weakness." The Lord has a history in the Scriptures of taking people that are weak and then working his strength through their weakness. The word for making perfect is similar to the word Jesus used on the cross when he said, "It is finished." The Lord has a plan in mind that he will carry to completion and perfection, even it that plan includes your weakness and troubles. That

is why Paul could make the bold statement, "That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecution, in difficulties. For when I am weak then I am strong."

I am holding in my hand a pincushion. The cushion feels no pain when the needles are stuck into it. The same is not true of the human body. I think of a woman named Margaret who had over 20 surgeries in her lifetime. In the autumn years of her life, her deteriorating spine put pressure on her nerves and her body was wracked with pain. One day I visited her in the hospital. She had just had a long needle put up her spine. Her pain was unbearable, but I knew she was OK, because her favorite verse of the Bible was "My Grace Is Sufficient for You." She made me promise I would preach this at her funeral, because she wanted her friend to come and hear the message of God's grace in Christ. Such strength and confidence comes from knowing the promise that Jesus gives us this morning. "My grace is sufficient for you." Amen.