

“GOD’S SUFFICIENT GRACE FOR MOMS.”

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First Christian Reformed Church

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Scripture Texts: II Corinthians 12:7-10

My sermon title this morning should be God’s sufficient grace for moms and everyone else, but that was too long. The sermon is for everyone, with some application at the end for moms.

All of us are privileged to see into the first heavens where birds and airplanes fly. And all of us are privileged to see into the second heavens inhabited by our moon and sun and stars and galaxies. But very few are there who have ever seen into the third heavens, the habitation of God in all His glory, and lived to tell about it.

The context of this passage is that 14 years before writing this letter to the church in Corinth Paul had been given by God an extraordinary vision of heaven. He heard and saw things that were too magnificent even to utter. It was an exceedingly extraordinary manifestation of God’s favor to him, a gift like no other.

Because we humans have a tendency to become puffed up or full of ourselves when we are in possession of personal advantages far above others, Paul was given a thorn in the flesh to keep him humble.

What is the thorn in the flesh?

We are not told what it was, though there has been plenty of speculation over the centuries.

The safest clue might be in the four words Paul uses in verse 10, insults and mocking and being made to feel a fool for his faith; hardships and painful circumstances and reversals of fortune; persecutions and prejudice and injustice because of his message; and calamities, misfortune, shipwrecks, accidents, exposed to danger, robbed, poverty, hunger. Paul had a hard life.

It is not sin or sinful behavior or bad choices. These would not be weaknesses Paul could boast in. It was an affliction of body and soul, so painful it was a hindrance to him and his ministry. When you get a sliver under your fingernail or a deep thorn stuck in you, you stop everything and focus all your attention on getting it out.

Where did it come from?

Did it come from God or Satan or both?

Paul calls it a messenger of Satan to harass him. Satan does afflict the children of God and seeks to steal, kill and destroy (John 10:10). But it is clear Satan is not the only one at work here. God is clearly part of this, in fact, God is over all of it.

First, notice in verse 7 Paul tells us twice why he was given it, too keep him from being conceited. Well, that's not Satan's purpose, that's God's purpose, so it's from God. God uses Satan to undo what Satan wants to do.

Job is an example of how God allows Satan to afflict, but only in the way God permits, and for God's greater purposes.

The same thing happened to Peter. Remember Jesus' words:

Luke 22:31-32 "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, 32 but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers."

Second, Paul appeals to God multiple times to take it away. Paul recognizes it is from God. And God answers him that His grace is in this, God gave it to him.

So, when trials and troubles, heartaches and hardships, difficulties and dilemmas come, when weaknesses and circumstances that try men's souls come, Satan may be behind it, but God is always behind Satan. God is in complete control of Satan.

Why did God give it?

It always comes down to that, doesn't it? Why? Why does God allow these things to happen?

Why can't I find a job or at least a better one? Why am I stuck in this difficult marriage? Why is my kid having so much trouble at school? Why am I being treated so unfairly at work? Why can't we have children? Why don't I have any friends? Why does my spouse have cancer? Why did my child or spouse die? Why do I have this handicap? Why has my life turned out way it has? Why can't I have what he has or be more like her? Why does God want us to spend our money on doctor bills or car repairs? Why do the troubles keep piling on, can't God see I am overwhelmed enough? Why does God seem so unfair?

We know the way that leads to life is narrow and hard, but does it have to be this narrow and this hard?

In Paul's case he is aware of two reasons.

First, he says it was to keep him from being exalted or conceited. This is God's sanctifying work in his soul. Pride led to Satan's fall, pride led to Adam's fall, pride is the strongest, greatest and last enemy we all fight in our souls. It is a deadly poison. God will not have us proud and we should not despise His humbling.

This must be galling to Satan. Satan who is proud and arrogant and who tempts us to be proud, is sent by God to make Paul not proud. God makes Satan do the opposite of what Satan wants to do, in fact to undo what Satan wants to do. Satan gets used.

This is God's mercy and grace being shown to Paul to keep him from falling into Satan's trap and Satan's sin. Satan meant it only for evil, he meant it to destroy Paul, so what great mercy it is that God turns it completely around to be for Paul's healing and sanctification.

God has designed our sins and shortcomings and weaknesses and frailties to remind us of our humanity, our creatureliness, our dependence on God. Bodily frailty and affliction are especially useful to this end. It causes us to have to submit our wills and our desires to God's.

This is why I say don't trust a person who doesn't walk with a limp, who hasn't been humbled.

For the non-Christian trials and afflictions are a source of frustration, anger, despair and depression. For the Christian our outlook is entirely different. We can see God's hand, we can see God's purposes. And when we can't, by faith we trust and believe the purposes of a perfect and good God are behind everything.

II Corinthians 1:8-9 We were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. 9 Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.

But the second reason is the biggest and most important.

It is big enough that three impassioned, earnest, fervent prayers from the greatest apostle couldn't override it. Believe me, if it had been to Paul's advantage it would have been removed.

I am reminded of Jesus praying three times for the cup to pass from Him. There is something much bigger at stake here.

The answer that God gave to Paul rang in his ears the rest of his life and it still rings in the ears of all suffering saints in all ages and places.

“My grace is sufficient for you, for *my* power is made perfect in [*your*] weakness.”

These words should be engraved in all our hearts, on all our minds, deeply in all our souls.

If we come off as feeling and looking strong, self-sufficient, I got this, I can do this, then who gets the glory?

God’s purpose and design is to put the glory and power of Jesus on display. The greater our weakness, the greater the glory of His strength that sustains us and delivers us.

God could have not given Paul that vision and then there would be no thorn, no pain. But God wants to be glorified in Paul’s life, not through the vision He gave him but through the manifestation of His power in Paul’s pain and weakness.

God allows this trial, so that He can meet that trial with a greater grace and so show His love for us. He brings flowers out of the ashes. This is why Paul is able to say:

“Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.”

I will rejoice in my suffering because it is an occasion for the display of Christ’s glory. His suffering became a joy to him for the sake of Christ.

[Kent and fire]

For most Christians, about the best they might be able to muster might be resignation to their suffering, to try as best they can to patiently endure.

Some might be able to rise to the level of submitting to being an example of Christ’s glory, to display His sufficient grace.

But to rejoice in our afflictions because in them Christ is glorified, well that’s asking too much.

When Paul got his answer from God, not the answer he asked for or wanted, he didn’t then just resign himself, he didn’t just submit himself, he rejoiced. That Christ would choose to be glorified in his was to Paul an honor.

Paul is more than good with it. He says, “I will gladly boast of my weaknesses for the sake of Christ, and I am content with my weaknesses.” That’s the same word God uses when He speaks of His Son in whom He is well pleased. Paul is glad and well pleased for the sake of Christ, that the power of Christ may rest on him.

Now here is a serious question. If Paul had a choice, which do you think he would choose, no revelation and no pain, or revelation and pain? Which would you choose?

Or no pain and no gain? A glorious revelation of God and a pain that reveals the glorious power of Christ being made perfect in our weakness? It is worth pondering that God is more glorified in displaying His power in Paul’s weakness, than in Paul’s vision of God’s glory.

Moms.

I think being a wife and a mother is one of the hardest jobs on earth and therefore one of the noblest jobs any woman can have. Without diminishing any other careers, I think motherhood simply rises above all the rest of the good things a woman can do.

Too often it is done with too little thanks and too much criticism and complaining.

It calls for self-sacrifice, service, giving, exhausting effort, mundane repetition, humility and submission, daily dying to self, pouring yourself out daily for the sake of others.

They empty themselves every day, and then return the next day to do it all again, humbling themselves for the sake of others, loving, blessing, serving. It is a Christ like service like washing the feet and everything else that gets dirty every day.

We are not alone. And we are not without a Savior in heaven who can’t sympathize. He has suffered, He has borne a crown of thorns, He knows affliction, and He knows the purposes of God who would not take the cup away from Him.

Moms get grace, both in their need for it, dependence on it, and in need to give it freely.

Moms preach the Gospel to yourselves every day by saying:

I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, I am content [well pleased] with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities (2 Corinthians 12:9–10).

God is most glorified in that which we can’t do in our own strength or with our own resources.

“The beauty of the gospel is that it quenches disappointment. In the midst of our failures we see God’s sovereign hand working all things for our good” (Sara Wallace)/

Let the Gospel define you, not what the world says or your neighbors or other kid's moms.

Don't despise thorns. They are grace disguised, they are a severe mercy, a deep kindness from God. Each of our burdens are particularly and especially suited for our own souls and our own spiritual needs. Each of our burdens has a purpose specific for us now or in the future.

We all have thorns and we all think that we could be more effective or fruitful or useful without it. But that's just it, we are given our thorns to weaken us to make us stronger and more useful.

This is why knowing the Gospel is so important. We have to stay grounded in the truth of God's Word. God is sovereign over all the universe which He has created for His glory and His purposes. His grace abounds to us at all times in all circumstances.

To live according to the Gospel, to live daily preaching the Gospel to yourself is to live supernaturally. What do I mean by that? It means not to live naturally, not to live according to the flesh, not to live according to the world and worldly ways of thinking.

We live supernaturally when we look above our trials and troubles and hard realities and look for God's hand and for God's heart. We look up to live not for ourselves but for Him. We look up to live not in our own power and strength, but in God's power and strength.

We live supernaturally when we live by the Spirit and not our own flesh, when we get our hope and help and energy from above and not from within. We live supernaturally when we speak the truth of God's Word to our hearts, minds and souls.

Supernatural living is living dependent on God's sufficient and sustaining grace. Paul refused to feel shame over something that honors and glorifies God. Paul is aware that in his suffering he is part of a greater purpose of God, to glorify the power of Christ in our lives as a witness and testimony to the world.

May you have confidence in the Gospel. May you have confidence in the power of God in your life. May you have confidence in God's sufficient grace. May you not grumble or complain but have confidence to boast in your weaknesses for the sake of Christ. May you see and experience the glory of Christ in your life.

II Corinthians 4:7 We have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.