

**“My Grace Is Sufficient”**

*“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (II Corinthians 12:9).*

This week, we’ve been inundated with patriotic images of power and pride. Marching bands and fireworks helped us celebrate the legacy of liberty that enables us to live, work, and worship as we wish. And, even in today’s service, our hymns and prayers lead us to thank God for the blessings He has granted to our country. And yet, when we look at today’s readings, the language of power and pride is nowhere to be found. Instead, today’s readings are about suffering, rejection, and weakness.

In the Old Testament lesson, God calls Ezekiel to preach to an “impudent and stubborn” people who will refuse to listen to his words. Then, in the gospel reading from Mark, we find Jesus Himself facing rejection in His own hometown. And finally, we come to today’s text from II Corinthians where we hear Paul talking about insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. This hardly seems like the kind of material that would attract people to Jesus and yet, Paul’s words of weakness stand at the heart of the Christian faith.

Paul precedes this passionate portion of II Corinthians with what he calls “boasting.” Trying to establish his credibility with the Corinthian congregation, Paul lists the many ways he had suffered for the sake of the Gospel. In chapter 11, he writes, “Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches...If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness” (11:24-30).

While this list of “qualifications” may spark a sense of sympathy, it certainly doesn’t paint a very appealing picture. In his zeal for the Gospel of Jesus, Paul had lived a life of difficulty and deprivation, yet, when we finally get to the opening verses of today’s text, we hear Paul talking about an extraordinary spiritual experience where he was given a glimpse of heaven and allowed to see and hear things of God that escape explanation, and he includes this story of revelation for a reason. As one who had been converted by a miraculous, personal encounter with the Risen Christ Himself, witnessed extraordinary displays of God’s power, and even been taken to “the third heaven” the apostle Paul had every reason to be boastful and yet, in addition to all of his other struggles, Paul had been given what he called, “a thorn in the flesh.” Now, whether you want to say that God *allowed* this undefined “thorn” or that God Himself *inflicted* it on Paul, the fact is the messenger of Satan that harassed Paul and drove him to a place of desperate prayer, was controlled by God’s hand and, Paul tells us, the purpose of this thorn in the flesh was to keep Paul from becoming conceited.

This lesson from Paul's life is important for all of us to consider *because Paul was just like us*. Every one of us desires success over failure, and every one of us is drawn to strength instead of weakness, and the sinful nature inside each and every one of us will always pick a path of glory over a trail of tears. This is the way of the world – and it is also the craving of our hearts – and when it comes to spiritual matters, this quest for glory is always our blind spot.

Luther called this basic human inclination the “theology of glory” and Gene Veith describes this man-centered theology as one that, “expects total success, finds all the answers, wins all the battles, and lives happily ever after. The theology of glory is all about *my* strength, *my* power, and *my* works. A theologian of glory expects his church to be perfect and always to grow. If a theologian of glory gets sick, he expects God to heal him. And if he experiences failure and weakness, if his church has problems and if he is not healed, then he is often utterly confused, questioning the sufficiency of his faith and sometimes questioning the very existence of God. But, Luther pointed out, when God chose to save us, He did not follow the way of glory. He did not come as a great hero-king, defeating his enemies and establishing a mighty kingdom on earth. Rather...He saved us by the weakness and shame of dying on a cross.” And, Veith concludes, “Those who follow Him will have crosses of their own.”<sup>1</sup>

The crosses we bear in this life are different for each of us. Some bear the burden of chronic pain, others shoulder the weight of caregiving. Some of you in this sanctuary are experiencing financial struggles while others are facing uncertainty about the future. Today, some of you are exhausted by depression or anxiety, while others are saddled with persistent and paralyzing grief. While misery may love company, no two crosses are ever the same, and I think Paul knew this.

Countless commentators have attempted to identify Paul's “thorn in the flesh.” Some of the theories explaining Paul's thorn include a chronic eye problem or malaria, migraines, epilepsy, or a speech disability. Some even say that the thorn refers to a person who had caused Paul grief. The truth is, no one knows for sure what Paul's thorn in the flesh was, but the ambiguity surrounding this affliction is actually the point. These words from Paul were written not merely to prove his mettle as an apostle, but also to encourage us as we experience reversals, losses, and failures in our own lives.

Regardless of your station or experience in this world, crosses come for all of us. And in these challenging moments, the devil, the world, and our own sinful flesh will always point us to the things in life that appear powerful and proud, while avoiding the humbling of our hearts. But, my friends, it is in weakness that God comes, and it is through weakness that God works, and today, as you bear your cross in faith, the Lord is working His saving purpose in your life.

God told Paul, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (II Corinthians 12:9). In the valley of the shadow of death, and from a place of utter weakness, these words give us the strength to live and faith to forgive because, in Christ Jesus, we have been forgiven, life has been given, and today, you can be sure that His grace is always sufficient. Go with the peace of this promise God has made to you today, and all God's people say, “Amen.”

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/glory-versus-cross/>