

God's Grace In Times Of Need

2 Corinthians 12:1-10

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In verse 9 of 2 Corinthians 12, Paul tells us that God said something to him. God said, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." Notice that God spoke those words directly to Paul. Paul actually said, "I prayed, and God eventually answered." And this is God's answer to Paul's prayer: "My grace is sufficient for you."

As Christians, we know that God's grace is sufficient to save us. Ephesians 2:8-9 says, "By grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast." So we are well aware of the doctrine of salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

But not only does God's grace save us, but God's grace is also sufficient to sustain us in our suffering. What kind of suffering is God's grace sufficient for? Notice in verse 10 the list that Paul mentions. He mentions physical suffering; he uses the word "infirmities." He mentions mental suffering; he uses the word "reproaches." He mentions economic suffering; he uses the word "needs." He mentions social suffering; he uses the word "persecutions." Then he mentions emotional sufferings; he uses the word "distresses." If anything describes what we are going through as individuals, as a church, as a state, as a nation and as the world, it is verse 10: physical "infirmities," mental "reproaches," economic "needs," social "persecutions" and emotional "distresses."

But Paul says that in light of all that he was passing through, God's grace was sufficient to sustain him. I believe that the same grace of God that sustained Paul in what he described in verse 10 will also sustain us in a time like this.

What is the background or reason for Paul's words found in our text? The answer is that false teachers were questioning and attacking Paul's authority and integrity. The entire second epistle of Corinthians is actually written to defend his apostleship and to win back the hearts of the believers in Corinth.

The false teachers were known as "Judaizers." They were Jews who were telling Gentile Christians that they couldn't be saved unless they became Jewish. And they had to keep rites and rituals and follow the Mosaic law and all the ordinances of the Jewish religion. Basically, they were "Judaizing" the Gentiles, telling them they must be Jews in order to be saved. They were what we call "legalists." They tried to undermine Paul's message of God's grace—that we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. So Paul is actually writing here to defend his apostleship.

What happened was Paul had been forced into defending himself by boasting. Paul says, "If I'm going to boast about myself and my ministry to win your hearts back, I'm not going to boast in the things that are my strengths; I'm going to boast in my weaknesses." Paul didn't want

anyone to think of him above what he was.

Now there are two sections to our passage today. In verses 1-6, we see Paul's Paradise experience. Paul began to boast that about 14 years ago, he had been caught up into heaven, into Paradise, and he actually saw and heard things that were unutterable. The second section is verses 7-10, and it is Paul's painful experience. So we will go from Paul's Paradise experience to Paul's painful experience in which he describes a thorn in his flesh.

First, we will look at Paul's Paradise experience, in verse 1-6. Paul says, "It is doubtless not profitable..."—or "proper" or "right"—"...for me to boast." Paul said it isn't right for him to brag. He could brag; he was an apostle of the Lord and had visions and revelations from Christ. But it's not really a good thing for him to do. Paul was saying that this was a necessary evil to accomplish a good purpose. It's not expedient; it's something he had to do. But he really didn't want to do it.

He continues, "I will come to visions..."—indicating what Paul saw in heaven—"...and revelations..."—indicating what Paul heard—"...of the Lord." So Paul was going to brag about the revelations and visions that he had received from the Lord.

He says, "I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago—whether in the body I do not know, or whether out of the body I do not know, God knows—such a one was caught up to the third heaven. And I know such a man—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows—how he was caught up into Paradise..."—so Paul calls it "the third heaven" and identifies it as "Paradise"—"...and heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter. Of such a one I will boast; yet of myself I will not boast, except in my infirmities." So Paul said he would not boast about this individual who was caught up into heaven, who saw and heard these things. But of himself, he will boast in his weaknesses and infirmities. Verse 6, "For though I might desire to boast, I will not be a fool; for I will speak the truth. But I refrain, lest anyone should think of me above what he sees me to be or hears from me."

So Paul has basically been forced into boasting. He doesn't want to do it, he doesn't think it's the right thing to do, but it was necessary to win the hearts of the Corinthians, because they were being led astray by false teachers.

What motivated Paul was not self-advancement but the glory of God and the Gospel of Christ. He wasn't doing what he was doing so people would follow him; he was doing what he was doing so the church would be healthy, have sound doctrine and know the truth, which the Bible says will set men free.

So in verses 1-4, we have his exaltation, talking about his experience. If you're going to brag, you might as well brag humbly, so Paul speaks in the third person, not identifying himself. He starts by saying, "I know a man." We know that Paul is talking about himself here. In verse 7, he said that there was an "abundance of...revelations...given to me." Though he puts this experience in the third person, we know that he is talking about himself. So he is boasting, but

he is doing it as humbly as he can.

Paul says, "I know a man in Christ." Then the next thing he points out is that it was "fourteen years ago." When that was in Paul's life is a little uncertain, so it's best to say that we don't know what time in Paul's ministry when Paul had this vision or this revelation. Some feel it might have been when he was stoned in Lystra. Some feel it was when he was in the Arabian desert, when God spoke to him. It could be when he was at Corinth and God spoke to him. It could be when he was in Jerusalem. We really don't know, but it was "fourteen years ago." It is interesting that Paul was forced into telling about this experience. It took him 14 years to do that.

Secondly, he said, "whether in the body...or whether out of the body, I do not know." He mentions that twice, in verses 2 and 3. He said it happened 14 years ago, and it was so amazing that he didn't know if he was in his body caught up to heaven physically, which is possible, or whether he was transported from his body.

It's possible that when John was on the island of Patmos, in the book of Revelation, when he said, "I was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day," he spiritually was translated forward in time to the day of the Lord, which is the tribulation, and he saw the coming of Christ and the things of the end of time.

So Paul says it was "fourteen years ago—whether in the body I do not know, or whether out of the body I do not know, God knows—such a one was caught up..."—that's the third point he makes—"...to the third heaven." The words "caught up" are the same words we use for the rapture: "harpodzo." He was "harpodzoed" or caught up or snatched up. He was taken up into heaven.

The "third heaven" is not a reference to divisions of heaven where God is. It is a reference to the one place called "heaven" or "Paradise" where God dwells. The Bible uses one phrase for the heavens above the earth where the birds fly and the clouds are. Then the Bible uses another phrase for heaven in the atmosphere above the earth where the sun, moon and the stars and galaxies are. The Bible says, "The heavens declare the glory of God." Then the Bible uses the words "third heaven" for Paradise, where the very presence of God is.

Remember when the thief on the cross turned to Jesus and said, "Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom"? Then Jesus said, "Today you will be with Me in Paradise." So before Jesus' death and Resurrection, there was this compartment called "Paradise," where he would dwell there with the Lord.

So Paul didn't know if he was in the body or out of the body, but he was caught up into Paradise, into the presence of God.

Then, verse 4, Paul says again, "...how he was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter."

I put very little stock in people who claim to have died and gone to heaven then came back to tell us all about it. If we hear of anybody who does that, we have to look at God's Word to make sure what they say is in sync with His Word. And if it's already in God's Word, I don't need somebody's revelation or experience, because that's subjective, but God's Word is objective.

Paul was caught up to heaven, he came back and he didn't get booked on television, he didn't write a book, he didn't make a movie about it. He didn't even tell anybody about it. He had to be forced into speaking about it. Then when he did speak about it, he said he didn't really even know how to utter what he saw and heard. He said it was something unlawful for a man even to utter.

In verses 5-6, Paul explains his reservations. "Of such a one I will boast, yet of myself I will not boast, except in my infirmities." That was a glorious experience he had, but he pushed it off into the third person. "For though I might desire to boast, I will not be a fool; for I will speak the truth. But I refrain, lest anyone should think of me above what he sees me to be or hears from me." So Paul says—and the key is—that Paul would only glory in his infirmities.

The Judaizers or false teachers could not brag about this experience; they couldn't say that they were caught up into heaven and saw Paradise. If they could have, they would have gladly said so to gain a following. But Paul said, "I was caught up and heard and saw revelations and visions."

Then Paul moves to the heart of the passage, in verses 7-10, to the painful experience. "And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations..." He was saying that because there was a danger from being caught up to heaven and having all these revelations, and several times the Lord appeared personally to Paul and revealed truth, "a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times..."—he prayed to God three times—"...that it might depart from me. And He said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength...'—notice "grace" and "strength"—"...is made perfect..."—or "complete"—"...in weakness.' Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power..."—or "dunamis"—"...of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake." And here's the conclusion: "For when I am weak, then I am strong."

So we move from the Paradise experience to the painful experience. It teaches us an important lesson: that God knows how to balance our lives. He takes us to Paradise and then He gives us pain to keep us humble and dependent on Him. Because of Paul's Paradise experience, he was in danger of pride, so God gave him a painful experience to keep him humble and useful.

This is one of those passages, verses 7-10, that is so full of spiritual application and truth that it kind of frustrates me that I can't bring out everything there is to bring out in this passage. There are packed in these verses so many lessons of the Christian life like learning to walk humbly and dependently and being used by God and relying upon His grace.

Let's go back to verse 7, Paul's thorn. What was Paul's thorn? We don't know. I tell you that, because a lot of people want to speculate on what Paul's thorn is. It's interesting that, as preachers, we are to be expositors, not speculators, but there are a lot of preachers who are speculators and not expositors. Some hypothesize that it was the false teachers, in the context of 2 Corinthians, who were hassling Paul. Maybe it was the persecutions or epilepsy. Some said he had malaria. There was some indication that Paul had bad eyesight; he told the Galatians that if it were possible, "you would pluck out your own eyes and give them to me." In one of his epistles, he said, "You see how large the letters I have written unto you." So Paul may have had bad eyesight.

One of the craziest speculations I have seen is that one commentator thought that maybe Paul's thorn in his flesh was his wife. I don't think so. We don't know if Paul was even married. If he was, I don't think you could classify that as a thorn in your flesh. So we just don't know what it was.

But it's a good thing we don't know what it is, and because of that, we can relate to Paul's thorn. I think the best guess is in verse 10: "the infirmities...reproaches...needs...persecutions...distresses." All these hardships that Paul was going through, to him, they were like a thorn in his flesh.

The word "thorn" here can be an actual thorn. But the Greek word could also refer to a large stake, a crippling stake that was in his flesh. Because he uses the words "in the flesh," my guess is that it would be some physical infirmity or some physical ailment.

Now how should we react to our thorns or painful experiences? Maybe you have infirmities or reproaches or are going through a time of necessity, persecution or distress. I believe we should react or respond to these difficult circumstances, our thorns, the same way Paul did.

There are three important ways he responded—and we should respond. Number one, we should pray. It's important to remember that when a time of difficulty comes upon our lives, the first thing—and the most important thing—to do is to turn to God in prayer. Verse 8 says, "Concerning this thing I pleaded..."—in prayer—"...with the Lord three times..."—and here's what he asked Him to do—"...that it might depart from me."

I want to mention two ways to pray, in a time of adversity and difficulty, when you're experiencing a thorn in your flesh. Like Paul did here, we can pray to escape our suffering. This is the natural response. Right now we might pray, "Lord, get rid of the corona virus. Lord, heal my friend. Lord, heal my loved one. Lord, heal these people who are sick." We're asking God to take it away.

I know that when things go wrong in my life that are really hard to accept, my first and natural response—which is not to be the response of a Christian; it's to be a spiritual response—is to ask God to just take it away. "Lord, would you just get rid of it! Just remove this thorn!" So we are praying to escape our suffering.

Paul prayed three times that God would take it away, verse 8. Some say that this is a lack of faith. Some Word faith teachers say that if you pray for one thing more than once, you shouldn't ask for God's will. You should claim it and speak it and receive it. Then it's a lack of faith. Not so. Jesus was in the garden of Gethsemane and He was praying to His Father. Three times He prayed, "Take this cup away from Me; nevertheless, not what I will, but what You will." The Father answered Him in the negative; He gave Jesus the cup to drink.

Sometimes we want to escape the suffering; that's fine to ask God to take it away. But the second way to pray in a time of suffering—and more importantly—is to pray to enlist our suffering. We should pray not to escape our suffering but to enlist our suffering, that our suffering works for us and not against us. We don't want to resist; we want to yield.

Ask God for wisdom. James 1 talks about the trials we go through, and, in context, he says, verses 5-7, "If any of you lacks wisdom..."—we all lack wisdom sometimes, so what we need to do is—"...let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. For let not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord." So if you ask, God will give you liberally, and he won't upbraid you.

I believe this is wisdom: to know God, to say, "God, what do You want me to learn? How do You want me to live? How should I respond? How should I react in this time of crisis in our nation and in our world?"

We need to pray, and we need to pray for God's will. The purpose of prayer is not to get your will done on earth; it is to get heaven's will done on earth. Remember how the Lord taught us to pray? "Our Father, Who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy Name; Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." Before there is any petition for daily bread, which is okay to pray for, there is the petition, "Thy will be done."

I like what F.W. Robertson said about praying for God's will. He said, "Pray until prayer makes you forget your own wish, and leave it, or merge it, in the will of God." Keep praying, keep seeking the Lord until finally you are so broken, so yielded that you want God's will; that you say, "Lord, whatever it is You want, I accept. I receive what You want for me. I surrender to You." It's so important for us to pray according to the will of God. Then we ask God to use our suffering, use our sorrow, for our good and for His glory.

I want you to note that God always answers prayer. This prayer that Paul prayed God is going to answer. But He didn't answer it the way Paul wanted Him to. Sometimes we get the idea that we pray and ask God to do something, but when God doesn't do it, so we think that God didn't answer that prayer. He did answer your prayer. One of the ways He often answers our prayers is by saying "No." When God says "No," that's an answer. When God says "Yes," we rejoice, and that's wonderful. But God also says "Wait" sometimes. Those are the tough ones. When heaven seems like brass and our prayers are bouncing off of it, we don't think God is listening and He's not answering us, God just may be saying "Wait." God has His time to fulfill

His purpose. Or God might also say, "I've got something different for you."

God says "No," God says "Yes," God says "Wait" and God says, "I've got something better. You're asking for this, but little do you realize that I've got something better, if you'll wait and be patient and trust in Me." I love the statement that says, "God gives the best to those who trust in Him or who leave the choice to Him." When you pray say, "Not my will but Thine be done."

So the first thing we need to do is to pray in our sorrow. The second thing we need to do is to see our thorns, our sorrow and suffering is given or allowed by God. I choose my words very carefully: "given or allowed by God." God sovereignly will allow us to suffer, because He wants to bring out His purpose through that time of suffering. Notice verse 7: Paul says, "a thorn in the flesh was given to me."

Years ago I discovered something that has blown my mind ever since. That is the little statement "given to me." A lot of people are arguing what the thorn in the flesh was, but they miss this little statement that Paul said: "given to me."

The question should be, "Who gave the thorn to Paul?" I don't think you can come up with any other answer than "God did." What Paul is saying is that God had allowed it. Paul uses the phrase "given to me," but in reality, God allowed it to serve His purposes.

Why would God allow or give Paul a thorn in his flesh? We've already looked at that: it was to keep him humble lest he "should be exalted above measure." It's pretty clear. That's a good thing; humility is a good thing. Pride is a bad thing.

We look at the world right now and we say, "This is bad." In and of itself, the corona virus is a bad thing. But God can bring good from that. That's what God specializes in doing. God specializes in bringing strength out of weakness, in bringing good out of evil. St. Augustine said, "God, rather than not let evil exist, chose to bring good out of evil." I certainly think that's what we are seeing in the world today; God can bring good out of this evil that has come upon us.

Paul said that he was humbled because of this thorn in his flesh. Verse 7 says "lest I be exalted above measure." The NLT renders that "to keep me from becoming proud." God allowed this in his life to keep him from becoming proud.

Here is another lesson from this—as I mentioned, there are many: This was not punishment for sin, but it was preventative, to keep him from sin. This was not punishment, because of sin in Paul's life; it was preventative, to keep him from sinning.

We might never know what God has planned or purposed in what is going on in our nation today. But God has a purpose, and God has a plan. He knows what He is doing, and we can trust in Him.

Many times in our own individual lives, God will allow suffering, sickness, affliction, sorrow,

bereavement, loss and financial reverse so that we would stay humble and dependent on Him. It's not to punish us, but to prevent us from becoming proud and, thus, unusable.

Some might argue and say, "But wasn't this 'a messenger of Satan,' verse 7?" Paul says this was "a messenger of Satan to buffet me." The same thing holds true; God can actually use Satan to serve His purposes. Satan is a puppet in the hands of God. God can actually use the works of Satan to serve His own purposes.

Remember in the book of Job when he was attacked and lost all that he had? You talk about a difficult time! Job lost his family, his wealth, his possessions and his health. Then Job said, "The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord."

Maybe as you're looking at the economy crashing right now and you're looking at your retirement fund, you're quoting Job right now: "The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away." But how about the part that says, "Blessed be the name of the Lord"? You say, "Oh, I don't know about that." The Lord gives, and the Lord takes away and the Lord can give again. But what's important is that God be glorified. "Blessed be the name of the Lord."

God can use the unrighteousness of man and even Satan's tactics to serve His sovereign purposes. So number one, we need to pray; and number two, we have to trust that God has allowed circumstances to serve His purpose.

Now the big one is number three: whenever we're battling a thorn in our flesh and going through times of difficulty, we should remember that the spiritual is more important than the physical. I didn't say that the physical is not important; I said the spiritual is more important. It's not that the physical is unimportant; our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit. God doesn't delight in seeing His children suffer. He doesn't delight in seeing them sick. But God wants our spiritual man to be strengthened more than our physical man. Jesus taught us to pray, "Give us our daily bread." So not only do we pray, "Thy will be done," but we know that it is God's will to provide for our bodies. He promised to take care of us and to sustain us; that's important.

But it is also important not to worry. In Matthew 6, Jesus says, "Don't worry; look at the fields and the flowers. Look at the beautiful flowers and how they are clothed. Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these." He said, "Look at the birds...they neither...gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them." God takes care of us. Then at the end of this section in Matthew 6, in verse 33, Jesus says, "But seek first..."—that's the priority—"...the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things..."—these other material things—"...shall be added to you."

What are some of the spiritual benefits that Paul's thorn brought to him? They are very important. We are going to consider the spiritual more important than the physical, make it the priority. The first spiritual benefit is that it kept Paul prayerful. I already pointed that out in verse 8. This thorn kept Paul on his knees praying, and that's a good thing.

Have you ever found yourself drifting out of prayer and not really spending time in prayer, not

really seeking the Lord, and something goes wrong? You say, "Lord, help me!" He says, "Well, how are you doing? I haven't talked to you in a while." That's because nothing's broken, nothing's happening. It's so difficult to maintain a deep, intimate prayer life when everything's going smoothly, when the road's slightly downhill, when the wind's at our back and when people are clapping and singing our praises—when everything's fine. But when the road is narrow, steep, difficult and dark and it's hard, it drives us to prayer. So it kept Paul on his knees.

Know this: if what we are going through now as a nation and in the world makes us pray more, that's a good thing. If God can use this to get His people to pray—to quote a passage in the Old Testament, "If My people who are called by My name will humble themselves and pray...." God wants us on our knees. He wants us to be dependent and looking to Him. So that is a good, spiritual benefit of trouble.

Secondly, the spiritual benefit of Paul's trial is that it kept him humble. We saw that in verse 7. It kept him humble, "lest I be exalted above measure." God knows how to keep us humble. God knows how to take us down a notch or two in order to keep us dependent on Him.

Thirdly, it kept him useable. Paul's Paradise experience and all the revelations and visions that God had given him might have puffed him up with pride. The Bible says that "He regards the lowly; but the proud He knows from afar." In 1 Corinthians 1:26-27, 29, it says, "You see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty." Why? "...that no flesh should glory in His presence." We can be too big for God to use but never too small. God uses the prayerful and the humble.

Then fourthly, it taught Paul that God's grace is sufficient. One of the spiritual benefits of trials, sufferings and hardships is, in verse 9, it taught Paul that God's grace is sufficient. He said, "My grace is sufficient..."—or "adequate" or "it meets the need"—"...for you, for My strength..."—this is the word "power" or "dunamis"—"...is made perfect..."—or "complete"—"...in weakness." Paul says, "Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities..."—he used this word four or five times in this passage—"...that the power of Christ..."—the "dunamis"—"...may rest upon me."

This is God's school of suffering to serve God's purpose to teach us that we're not only saved by grace, but we are sustained and kept by the grace of God. God's grace will get you to heaven, and God's grace will also sustain you while on earth until you get there. God's grace will keep you until you get to heaven. But we need to rely on His grace.

The tense of the verb in verse 9 where it says, "And He said to me" indicates that the reply from God to Paul's prayer was a continuous answer. It means that it wasn't just this one time that God spoke to Paul and said "My grace is sufficient for you." It means that Paul lived with the thorn in his flesh every day, continually. Every day, throughout the day, every moment of the day God kept saying to Paul, "My grace is sufficient. My grace is sufficient. My grace is

sufficient.” When he got up in the morning, he heard the Lord say, “My grace is sufficient.” When he was going through the day, he heard the Lord say, “My grace is sufficient.” When he laid down at night—sometimes it was just on the dirt and stone during his travels in the cold, with very little food—he heard God say to him before he fell asleep, “My grace is sufficient.” When he woke up in the night and couldn’t sleep in the dark, he heard God’s voice say to him, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.”

If you’re feeling weak right now, that can be a good thing. If it drives you to prayer, if it brings about humility, if it causes you to rely upon God’s all-sufficient grace, it’s good. What is a bad thing is when everything is going smoothly, and we drift off or wonder off from God.

There may be some of you who are reading this now, and God is speaking to your heart, saying that you have drifted far from Him. Maybe you haven’t been to church in weeks or months or years, but you’ve gotten back into church. Maybe not into an actual church building, but you’re watching online, but God is speaking to you. He’s saying it’s time for you to be humble, it’s time for you to pray, it’s time for you to turn back to Him. You can’t do it on your own; you need His strength, His sufficient strength, and it comes by the grace of God. So don’t rely upon your own wisdom or strength; rely upon God’s all-sufficient grace.

I like the story in the gospels when Jesus was going to feed 5,000 men and women with a few loaves of bread and a few fish. It certainly was not—catch the word—sufficient. If you looked at the supply, and you looked at the need, you would say, “It’s not sufficient.” Even Jesus turned to Philip and asked, “Where shall we buy bread, that these may eat?” And Philip said, “Two hundred denarii...”—which was a day’s wage—“...worth of bread is not sufficient for them, that every one of them may have a little.” So Philip immediately dismissed any possibility that they were going to feed this multitude; they didn’t have a sufficient supply.

But Philip forgot to reckon on Jesus, to look to Jesus. The Master was standing right there! So Jesus said, “Bring them here to Me.” He took the bread and the fish and blessed them, broke it and gave it to the apostles to distribute. They fed the multitude. Why? Because Jesus is the supplier. He’s our sufficient one.

You might be looking at your bank book right now, at your checking account, and saying, “It’s not sufficient. I don’t know how we’re going to pay the bills. I don’t know how we’re going to get through this. I don’t know how it’s all going to work.” Set your eyes on Jesus. All He needed was a few loaves and a few fish. He’ll break it, distribute it and He will provide. Trust in Jesus Christ. His grace is sufficient.

Notice fifthly, that Paul was taught and learned the paradoxical truth of God’s power. So the spiritual benefits were it kept him prayerful, humble, useful, it kept him relying upon God’s sufficient grace and it taught him the paradoxical truth of God’s power, verses 9-10. “And He said to me...‘For my strength is made perfect in weakness.’”

The word “strength” here, as I pointed out, means “dynamic power.” He continues, “Therefore

most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power..."—the "dynamic, dunamis power"—"...of Christ may rest upon me." The phrase "may rest upon me" has the idea of a tent pitched over him, resting continually upon him.

Now here is the conclusion, verse 10: "Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong."

How can Paul take pleasure in infirmities and weaknesses? Because he valued the spiritual more than the physical. It's great when the Lord heals us. It's great when the Lord provides. It's great when the Lord takes care of us. But the most important is the spiritual over the physical. So Paul learned that when he was weak, then he was strong. Notice verse 10 closes with, "For when I am weak, then I am strong."

You could turn that around, and it would be equally true. When I am strong, then I am weak. Your greatest assets are your weaknesses. Your greatest abilities are your inabilities, when they force you and drive you to dependence on God.

One of the current-day illustrations of that is a woman who God has used so powerfully over the years. Her name is Joni Erickson-Tada. She had an accident and became a quadriplegic. For many, many years she had been confined to a wheelchair, and she lives in constant pain. But anytime I hear Joni speak, the power, the anointing, the blessings, the insight, the humility, the grace that is upon her life amazes me. When she speaks, I listen, because she speaks from experience. She has found God's grace to be sufficient in all of her weaknesses. It has driven her to prayer. And out of her life has come healing and blessing to others.

On this situation, J. C. Ryle said, "Let me mark this well. There is nothing which shows our ignorance so much as our impatience under trouble. We forget that every cross is a message from God and, indeed, to do us good in the end. Trials are intended to make us think, to wean us from the world, to send us to the Bible, to drive us to our knees. Health is good, but sickness is far better; it leads us to God. Prosperity is a great mystery, but adversity is a greater one, if it brings us to Christ. Anything is better than living in carelessness and dying in sin. Better a thousand times to be afflicted like the Caananite mother and, like her, to flee to Christ than to live at ease like the rich fool and die at last without Christ and without hope." How true that is. "Anything is better than living in carelessness and dying in sin."

Paul said that he sought the Lord, he was humbled by the Lord, he thus was used by the Lord, he experienced the grace of the Lord and he realized the power of the Lord. Like a tent, just pitched over him, it was constantly empowering him and strengthening him, and he knew that God's grace was sufficient for all his needs.

A great illustration is the Cross of Christ. This Friday we will celebrate the death of Christ and on Sunday the Resurrection of Christ. But every day, for the Christian, we come to the Cross. Every day, as Christians, we celebrate the resurrection power. Paul said, "For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain." He also said, "I have been crucified with Christ," nevertheless "I now

live.”

But out of the weakness of the Cross, out of the shame, suffering, sorrow and pain of a crucified Savior, out of His death came His burial and Resurrection in which He conquered, in power, Satan, death and the grave.

God specializes in using our weaknesses to bring Him glory. God has a purpose and God has a plan. And in the Cross, we glory. And in the Cross, we are crucified to the world, and the world is crucified unto us. We need to live constantly in the shadow of the Cross, because out of the Cross comes our forgiveness and comes our strength.