

Sermon for February 16, 2025 - 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany

2 Corinthians 12:7–10 EHV

Theme: **Let His grace be sufficient for you.**

- 1) As you plead to Jesus for mercy,
- 2) As you consider your reason to rejoice.

*<sup>7</sup>Therefore, to keep me from becoming arrogant due to the extraordinary nature of these revelations, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me, so that I would not become arrogant. <sup>8</sup>Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that he would take it away from me. <sup>9</sup>And he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, because my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will be glad to boast all the more in my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may shelter me. <sup>10</sup>That is why I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties, for the sake of Christ. For whenever I am weak, then am I strong.*

“O Lord, please take my anxiety away from me. My life is a mess. I hate how I feel and don’t know what to do. Why are you allowing me to suffer like this? I could do much more for you if I were at peace!”

Have you ever felt this way? We face numerous troubles in our lives. We worry about our finances, broken relationships, health, the loss of loved ones, natural disasters, crime, disease, and more. As Christians, we may also encounter mockery or disownment from those we love because of our faith. The devil may even torment us with unexplainable physical or emotional pain to drive us to despair. While most of these trials are temporary, some can persist for a lifetime. We cry out to God for mercy, but it seems like nothing happens. Why does the LORD allow us to suffer like this? What can we do?

With the Apostle Paul as our guide, let us learn how to handle the long-lasting troubles the LORD allows in our lives, under the theme: **Let God’s grace be sufficient for you.** 1) As you plead to Jesus for mercy. 2) As you consider your reason to rejoice.

Part One: Let God’s grace be sufficient for you as you plead with Jesus for mercy.

Before we delve into our sermon text, let’s consider the reason Paul wrote it. Self-proclaimed “super” apostles had infiltrated the church in Corinth, boasting about their supposed superiority over Paul. These false teachers propagated a perilous gospel that subtly diverted the Corinthians’ focus from Christ to human accomplishments.<sup>i</sup>

In response to their claims, Paul spoke of the incredible grace God had bestowed upon him—not by bragging about the extraordinary revelations he had been granted but by highlighting his weaknesses and trials.<sup>ii</sup> Why? To ensure that everyone’s attention would be drawn to Christ’s saving power rather than upon himself.

He wrote: <sup>7</sup>*Therefore, to keep me from becoming arrogant due to the extraordinary nature of these revelations, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me, so that I would not become arrogant.*

Now, what exactly was Paul's "thorn" in the flesh? Was it an excruciating physical pain or an unbearable anxiety that wouldn't go away? Perhaps it was a fierce, internal, spiritual struggle. Honestly, we may never know the true nature of Paul's "thorn in the flesh," for which I am grateful. Why? Because the uncertainty surrounding it makes it easier for us to apply his insights to our personal struggles.

Here is an important question to ponder: Was Paul's "thorn in the flesh" from Satan or the LORD? Was it good or evil? The answer is both. How can that be? Consider this: Is getting cut by a knife evil or good? "Evil," you might say. But what if the knife is a scalpel cutting out a tumour? Then it becomes good. The same applies to the suffering God allowed Satan to inflict upon Paul's life: it was evil used for good.

With evil intent, Satan sought to inflict immense physical suffering upon Paul to get him to question God's love. However, the LORD perceived a far greater threat to Paul's soul than what Satan intended. He foresaw how, if left unchecked, Paul's sinful nature would attempt to exploit God's miraculous revelations, leading him down a path of arrogance. Instead of guiding people to Christ, Paul could become like the "super-apostles," pointing to himself and causing both him and his hearers to fall from faith. Recognizing this potential danger, the LORD strategically employed Satan as an unwitting ally, allowing the devil to inflict suffering upon Paul to safeguard his salvation.

Do you want another example of how God uses Satan's evil to accomplish good? Consider how God allowed Satan to rage against Jesus on the cross. The devil intended it for the greatest of evils: to destroy Jesus and prevent salvation. God, however, used that evil for the greatest of good: to destroy the devil's power and secure our salvation forever.

Yes, even though Satan is behind all that you suffer and desires your destruction, your loving God remains in control. He uses earthly evil, just as a surgeon uses a scalpel, to preserve your life with Christ. That, of course, does not make the evil you experience any less painful. Paul's suffering was so intense that he wrote:

<sup>8</sup>*Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that he would take it away from me.*

Paul's description of what he did reminds me of the three times Jesus pleaded fervently with His Father in the garden of Gethsemane to take away His cup of suffering.<sup>iii</sup> Because Jesus did that, you can be certain that there's nothing wrong with fervently and persistently praying that the Lord spare you from the sufferings you face.<sup>iv</sup> You can also be confident that God hears you for His Son's sake. However, like Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, you will also want to pray, "Your will be done." Why? Because the Lord wants you to trust that even if He allows your suffering to persist, it will ultimately be for your good. While you may never fully comprehend His purpose in allowing such great suffering in your life, you can trust that God always keeps His promise to

benefit you through it. How can you be so certain? Because Jesus' death and resurrection prove it. They are the ultimate demonstration of God's love for you: historical facts to which you can always turn whenever you are tempted to doubt.

How did the LORD answer Paul's prayer?

*<sup>9</sup>And he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, because my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will be glad to boast all the more in my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may shelter me.*

To understand why Paul found such immense joy in Jesus' answer, we need to review what grace is. Simply put, God's grace is his extraordinary, saving love extended to undeserving sinners. Out of sheer grace, God pitied us from before the creation of the world.<sup>v</sup> Even though he knew we would rebel against him, He nevertheless devised a plan to save us from the hell we deserved. Grace is the reason Jesus was born into this earth: to suffer and die for our sins on the cross. More than that, God's grace moved Him to adopt us as His dearly loved children through Holy Baptism. He washed away all our sins, created faith in our hearts with His Gospel, and clothed us with Christ's righteousness to such an extent that when He looks at us, He sees Jesus.<sup>vi</sup> It is only because of God's grace that we belong to God, and He belongs to us. He made us coheirs with Christ, with everlasting life as our inheritance.<sup>vii</sup> Because of God's grace, the LORD promises that He will work in all things for our everlasting good. Nothing can separate us from His love.<sup>viii</sup>

As we cling to the grace God has for us in Jesus, something else happens: Christ's power is made complete in our weakness. Our lives become a living testimony that nothing depends on us but that everything depends on Him. As we cling to Christ in our weakness, Christ reveals his power through us, and the world stands in awe.

Want an example? Study church history and see the amazing effect Christian martyrs had on their oppressors. Despite their relentless efforts, persecutors were unable to compel Christians to abandon their faith. In fact, on occasion, the opposite occurred: persecutors were consumed by such guilt over the suffering they inflicted on Christians that they repented and converted to Christianity.<sup>ix</sup>

Do you want a more modern-day example of how Christ's power is made complete in our weakness? Visit a fellow Christian in the hospital. Why? Because, through their faith and perseverance, these Christians often encourage me more in my faith than I encourage them in theirs! What gives these Christians hope amid their suffering? God's amazing grace, centred in Christ as the trust His promise to give them the everlasting life He won for them. Such a trust shows Christ's power made perfect in our weakness.

Part Two: Let God's grace be sufficient for you as you consider your reason to rejoice.

What was Paul's response when Jesus redirected him to His grace as being sufficient?

He said: <sup>10</sup>*That is why I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties, for the sake of Christ. For whenever I am weak, then am I strong.*

Can you believe what Paul is saying? How can he delight in his weaknesses and take pleasure in his pain? Is Paul a masochist? I can assure you that he was not.

The key to understanding Paul lies in the phrase “for Christ’s sake.” You see, the apostle understood that everything Jesus allowed was for his benefit. Therefore, if the Lord ordained some arduous path for him throughout life, Paul could walk that path with joy, knowing that Christ intended it for his good.

Let me illustrate what I mean with an example. Chemotherapy treatments can be incredibly painful, and people don’t “take pleasure” in them. However, if your doctor assured you that these treatments would eliminate cancer from your body, I believe you would happily endure them, even though they made you feel weak and miserable. Why? Because of what those treatments were achieving. The same principle applies to all the hardships God allows in our lives. In and of themselves, we don’t find pleasure in them. But if we genuinely believe that God is working in them for our good, these troubles acquire new meaning, so much so that we can even find joy in them, as Paul wrote in another place:

*Our momentary, light trouble produces for us an eternal weight of glory that is far beyond any comparison. <sup>18</sup>We are not focusing on what is seen, but on what is not seen. For the things that are seen are temporary, but the things that are not seen are eternal.<sup>x</sup>*

Therefore, brothers and sisters in Christ, let God’s grace be sufficient for you whenever He allows ongoing suffering in your life. Focus on the incredible love He expressed for you through Jesus’ cross. Remember His promise to work in everything, even the evil He allows, for your everlasting good. Pray to Him for mercy, fully convinced that He hears you and will answer your prayers according to the love He has for you in Christ. If His answer is to prolong your suffering, continue to rely on His grace, trusting that the only reason He allows you to suffer is to benefit you in some way. Yes, let God’s grace be sufficient for you, regardless of your earthly circumstances. Why? Because He is keeping His promise to deliver you from every evil work of the devil and bring you safely home to Himself in heaven.<sup>xi</sup> Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Cf. 2 Corinthians 11:3-5, 13-15

<sup>ii</sup> Cf. 2 Corinthians 11:30

<sup>iii</sup> Cf. Luke 22:39-44 & Matthew 26:36ff

<sup>iv</sup> Cf. Luke 11:5-10

<sup>v</sup> Cf. Ephesians 1:3ff

<sup>vi</sup> Cf. Galatians 3:26-27

<sup>vii</sup> Cf. Romans 8:16-17

<sup>viii</sup> Cf. Romans 8:28-39

<sup>ix</sup> Cf. Romans 12:14-21

<sup>x</sup> 2 Corinthians 2:17-18 EHV

<sup>xi</sup> Cf. 2 Timothy 4:18