MY GRACE IS SUFFICIENT FOR YOU

2 Corinthians 12:1-19

Key Verse: 12:9a

“But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’”

In chapter 11 Paul went on humble boasting. He showed his life as an apostle of Christ, especially testifying to his sufferings for Christ, while exposing the false apostles as deceitful workmen who masquerade as servants of righteousness just as Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. Especially his godly jealousy for the Corinthians was distinct betrothing them to one husband, to Christ so that he might present them as a pure virgin to Christ. His fear was that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent’s cunning they might somehow be led astray from their sincere and pure devotion to Christ. He really wanted to prepare them to be pure and wise virgins who can go in with the bridegroom to the wedding banquet for the life with Christ in eternal joy and glory. In today’s passage Paul keeps on boasting, particularly to visions and revelations from the Lord. In this passage, chapter 12, especially the word “weakness” is written 4 times and “week” 1 time. God says to Paul who undergoes much suffering, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” May we deeply grasp these words of God.

**First, God’s grace and power in weakness (1-10).** Verse 1 says, “I must go on boasting. Although there is nothing to be gained, I will go on to visons and revelations.” Why does Paul go on this boasting? At that time the Greeks believed that those who were truly representatives of the gods had experienced mystic visions. The false teachers had no doubt come in and claimed such visions and revelations and transcendental spiritual experiences which set apart the great religious leaders from the crowd. The Corinthians were swept away these claims. So, in order to help the Corinthians believers Paul goes on to visions and revelations from the Lord. He says in verses 2-4, “I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body, I do not know—God knows. And I know that this man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows—was caught up to paradise. He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell.” What a vision and revelation! For the last fourteen years he said this to no one, for people did not need to know it. He said, “for there is nothing to be gained”, though surely God gave him this vision to sustain him in his suffering. He recites this incredible vision, referring to himself in the third person because of his humility.

Then he says in verse 5, “I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses.” He also had said in 11:30, “If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.” He continues in verse 6, “Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool, because I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain, so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say.” Paul does not want to stand falsely humble, but speak the truth, yet he wants to refrain so that people may not credit him more than due to him. It is true that what one says and does speak of that person.

And then he says in verse 7, “To keep me from becoming conceited because these surpassingly great revelations, there was a given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.” What is a thorn in his flesh Paul talks about here? There are many suggestions about this: Headaches, ophthalmia—eye problem, epilepsy, malaria, Malta fever, loss of hair, hysteria, hypochondria, gall stones, gout, rheumatism, sciatica, gastritis, leprosy, lice in the head, deafness, dental infection, neurasthenia, stuttering, etcetera. But let’s carefully examine what Paul said here: “a thorn in the flesh.” Thorn is in Greek *skolops* meaning any pointed thing, a steak, thorn. Stake is a long shaft of wood, sharpened at the end like a pencil, used for the express purpose of either making a fence or impaling someone. Such stakes were used literally to drive out straight through someone’s chest. This seems to be what Paul was talking about, a sharpened, wooden shaft to impale someone. And in Greek there is no “in” in the phrase “in the flesh.” One translation is “for the flesh.” And flesh is in Greek *sarx* meaning human nature. It was used in 10:2, “…some people who think that we live by the standards of the world”, in other translations, “…we live according to the flesh.” *Sarx* is sinful nature, unredeemed humanness—not just your physical body, but all impulses that are sinful, all the propensities that are sinful, that becomes the beachhead where temptation lands. We can surmise that Paul still had natural human impulses and propensities, not completely redeemed, though he was a great man of God in that stage of his life. It is likely that the Lord was using the sharpened wooden shaft literally to impale his flesh.

Still, what is the stake for his flesh? After saying, “a thorn in the flesh” or “a steak for the flesh”, he says right away, “a messenger of Satan, to torment me.” The word messenger is in the Greek aggleos from which we get the word “angel” in English. We are reminded of what Paul said in 11:13-15, “For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light.” We can say that the whole enterprise of the false teachers who came into Corinth spreading lies about him and discrediting him was basically under the influence of one of Satan’s angels. That demon ripped and tore up the church, which he had established with all heart and strength and cherished so much loving with the godly jealousy in the hope of presenting them as a pure virgin to Christ. God was using that demon to drive a stake through Paul’s otherwise proud flesh, as he said, “to keep me from becoming conceited”, “to keep me from exalting myself” It is as God allowed Satan to strike Job, who later confessed amid the unspeakable suffering, “But he knows the way that I take; when he has tested me, I will come forth as gold” (Job 23:10). Most probably God wanted Paul to grow all the more in humbleness so that he might use Paul for a greater purpose in Rome. We remember what Paul said in Ephesians which was written from a prison in Rome, “Be completely humble…”

It was so unbearable that three times Paul pleaded with the Lord to take it away from him, or it might leave or depart from him. But the Lord said to him, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Let’s think about God’s grace? The word “grace” is in the Greek *charis*, and it basically means a favor bestowed. It means a generous gift given. That is its sort of normal, common meaning. But in the sense of the New Testament where the word is mote than written 150 times, in its redemptive sense, it means a favor bestowed by God, a generous gift given by God to people who are totally undeserving and unworthy. When we think about God’s grace that he sacrificed his one and only so that we might be saved from our sins and eternal punishment and become his children, it is always sufficient. Paul said in Ephesians 1:7-8, “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding” and in 2:7, “in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.” Here Paul used the term, “the riches of God’s grace” again and again. John said in 1 John 3:1, “How great is the love that the Father lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!” And in Romans 8:17, “Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ.” Peter praised God in 1 Peter 1:3-4, “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade-kept in heaven for you.” In the riches of God’s grace, we have the hope of the riches of his glorious inheritance” (Eph 1:18). So Paul said in Romans 8:32, “He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?” The riches of God’s grace through his Son Jesus Christ made us rich, as we thought of in 2 Corinthians 8:9, “…though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.” Truly, God’s grace is sufficient. In John 1:14, John said of Jesus, “full of grace and truth” and 1:16, “From the fulness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another.” And as we studied, Paul says in 2 Corinthians 9:8, “God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.” He also used the expression, “the surpassing grace God has given you” in 9:14. Truly God is the God of grace. And the Bible ends with the words, “The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God’s people. Amen.”

But we should think further, for God says, “My grace is sufficient, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Here God’s sufficient grace relates to God’s power and man’s weakness. We can say that God’s sufficient grace is Gods’ perfect power, God’s power made perfect in man’s weakness. It means that in our weaknesses we can experience God’s perfect power and so his sufficient grace.

We know how powerful and strong Paul has been before writing this epistle of 2 Corinthians. In his first missionary journey he pioneered Asia Minor and established the churches one after another. In that journey he had many difficulties confronting the gospel enemies, but he overcame surely by depending on God. In Galatians he was strong toward his enemies, saying, “As for those agitators, I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves” (5:12). And he said in Galatians 6:17, “Finally, let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus.” In his 2nd missionary journey, he pioneered Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Corinth. In Philippi, he was severely flogged and imprisoned, but he prayed and sang hymns to God (Acts 16:15), and then there was an earthquake, and he was relieved. In Thessalonica he stayed just three weeks plus more, but there was such a powerful work that Thessalonians turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, accepting the word of God as the word of God, as it actually is (1:9; 2:13). In pioneering Corinth, it is written in Acts 18:9-11, “‘One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: ‘Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city.’ So Paul stayed for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God.” In his third missionary journey, in Ephesus the work of God through Paul’s teaching in the hall of Tyrannus for disciple-raising, which went for two years was powerful that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord (Acts 19:9-10). God did extraordinary miracles through Paul, so that even handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched him were taken to the sick, and their illnesses were cured and the evil spirits left them (19:11). A number of people brought their sorcery scrolls which were worth of more than 100 years of wages burned them publicly (19:19). So we hardly saw Paul’s weakness. But in 2 Corinthians we see a different aspect of Paul: in 2:1, “So I made up my mind that I would not make another painful visit to you”, in 2:12-13, “Now when I went to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ and found that the Lord had opened a door for me, I still had no peace of mind, because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I said good-by to them and went on to Macedonia”, and 7:5, “For when we came into Macedonia, this body of ours had no rest, but we were harassed at every turn—conflicts on the outside, fears within.” I believe that these were related to Paul’s description, “a steak for my flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me.” God did not let it depart from him, so that Gods’ power might be perfected in his weakness. God had a greater purpose for him to further serve the will of God for God’s world salvation plan.

There are many examples of this kind. Joseph’s betrayal by his brothers in Canaan and false accusation and imprisonment in Egypt, which last nearly 13 years. Later on wonderful words came out of his heart and mind, “You intended to harm me but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many life.” Forty years of God’s wilderness training for Moses. Numbers 12:3 says, “(Now Moses was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth.) David was pursued by Paul for 13 years being close to death several times. He could survive in God’s protection and his reverence for God. In his old age he wrote in 2 Samuel 23:3-4, “The God of Israel spoke, the Rock of Israel said to me: When one rules …in the fear of God, he is like the light of morning at sunrise on a cloudless morning..” Through their personal troubles and hardships, they all became strong through God’s power. We are to know that no one is free from afflictions and adversities. Isaiah 30:20 says, “…the Lord gives you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction…” Job 5:7 says, “…man is born to trouble.” It is good to realize through our afflictions and adversities and troubles how weak are and come to God. Yet, it is not easy to recognize our weaknesses and share them with others, asking for prayer support. I know one couple who remained childless more than several years after their marriage. I really wanted to pray with them every morning, but they were not willing, as if it were not a problem to them. People’s tendency in our society is to hide their weaknesses and inferiority only to show their strengths and superiority. S. Ian wanted to have a successful business by faith in God as a responsible head of his family and also to support God’s ministry powerfully. But he realized that was not God’s leading. He recognized this and now is seeking for a new job. That is God’s humble training for him to mould him as a humble, obedient man of God. I thank God for this. Proverbs 16:18 says, “Pride goes before destruction” and 15:33 says, “…humility comes before honour.” James 4:6 says, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble”, and Peter 5:5 says the same thing, “God opposes the proud but give grace to the humble.” What happened to my first daughter was a great dismay and shock to our family. We wondered why such a thing happened against her wishes and despite our long earnest prayer and the prayer support of many people of God. It was too painful and shameful a thing to bear. We felt that God was crushing us and we have been humbled before him. I thank God for his words of life, “My grace is sufficient, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” He wants me to have deep trust in him and live by faith all the more, coming nearer to the cross of Jesus, Christ crucified for my salvation and the salvation of the souls of my loved ones. Amen.

I am very weak and poor in my intellectual power, reading and writing, listening ability and communication skills as a messenger and a shepherd for God’s flock. I should recognize this and come to God and depend on him at each time. I see that the book of Hebrews well teaches us concerning our weaknesses and God’s help. 2:16 says, “For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham’s descendants”, 4:15, “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses…”, 4:16, “Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need”, 11:34, “…whose weakness was turned to strength…”, 12:12, “Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees”, and 13:5-6, “…God has said, ‘Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.’ So we say with confidence, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?’”

Paul had said in 1:26-31, “Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that one can may boast before him.” Here now Paul says in verse 9, “Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weakness, so that Christ’s power may rest on me.” He expressed his gladness about his weakness for Christ’s power resting on him. Paul continues to say in verse 10, “That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.” Lord, it may be our confession, “When I am weak, then I am strong.”

**Second, Paul’s affection for the Corinthians (11-21).** In verses 11-13 Paul says, “I have made a fool of myself, but you drove me to it. I ought to have been commended by you, for I am not in the least inferior to the ‘super-apostles,’ even though I am nothing. The things that mark an apostle—signs, wonders and miracles—were done among you with great perseverance. How were you inferior to the other churches, except that I was never a burden to you? Forgive me this wrong!” These verses constitute the conclusion of Paul’s defense of his apostleship despite the Corinthians’ error. Basically, there were three things that indicated his true apostleship, the supernatural, the marks or signs of a true apostle, his perseverance during suffering, and his utter unselfishness.

Now in verses 14-19 we see Paul’s concern for the Corinthians, showing his clear and rich affection for them. He says, “Now I am ready to visit you for the third time, and I will not be a burden to you, because what I want is not your possessions but you. After all, children should not have to save up for their parents, but parents for their children.” Paul, especially said, “What I want is not your possession but you.” He wanted them to just wanted them to be right with God and truly blessed by God, and used by God fully for his kingdom purpose and for his glory in their lives, not their possessions at all. Paul continues to say in verse 15, “So I will gladly spend for you everything I have and expend myself as well.” What a great love, self-sacrificing love! We see Paul’s deep heart for them. This heart of Paul was right before God. He continues, “If I love you more, will you love me less? Be that as it may, I have not been a burden to you. Yet, crafty fellow that I am, I caught you by trickery!” This is another sarcastic expression, since the accusers attacked him as a crafty and tricky guy. He continues, “Did I exploit you through any of the me I sent you? I urged Titus to go to you and I sent our brother with him. Titus did not exploit you, did he? Did we not act in the same spirit and follow the same course?” Paul’s love for them was true, sacrificial, and concrete.

And then he says in verse 19, “Have you been thinking all along that we have been defending ourselves to you? We have been speaking in the sight of God as those in Christ, and everything we do, dear friends, is for your strengthening.” As a conclusion of his defence Paul made it’s purpose very clear: it was for their strengthening.

Thank God for his wonderful words: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” These words of God be true in our lives.