

Sufficient Grace – 2 Corinthians 12:7-10

I. INTRODUCTION • Read vs. 1-7

A. *Cactus Patch*

1. It was the Summer before my sophomore year of high school.
2. The four of us were riding bikes on the dirt hills near my friend's house.
3. What we were doing years later would be called BMX. Back then it was called fun.
4. The 4 of us sat on our Stingrays at the top of a step hill, looking down a narrow dirt trail none of us had ridden before.
 - a. At the bottom, the path took a hard right across the face of another hill covered with cactus.
 - b. It was hot. The sun was directly overhead & with no shadows the terrain looked flat.
5. I decided to go first & eased off the brake.
6. I stood up off the banana seat & leaned back a bit to absorb the bumps with my legs.
7. I gained speed rapidly & flew down the hill, too fast to see the *jump* at the bottom.
8. With no warning, I was airborne, headed right at that hillside of cactus.
 - a. My bike hit & I went over the longhorn handlebars headfirst.
 - b. I put my hands out to break my fall – but they didn't help much.
 - c. I slid a good 10 feet through Prickly Pear cactus.
 - d. The t-shirt & shorts I wore didn't provide much protection.
 - e. I got slowly to my feet, looking like a pin cushion.
 - 1) The skin was gone from the base of both palms, under my left arm, & both knees.
 - 2) There were large cactus needles all over my hands, arms & thighs.
 - 3) Besides the large needles, I was *covered* with little yellow thorns about a quarter inch in length.
 - 4) There were so many of them it looked like fur.
 - 5) Every one of them was a little point of *fire*.
9. My friends saw it all & followed down the hill more slowly.
10. They stood there with their mouths open because I was a wreck.
11. They picked up my bike, twisted the front fork square so I could ride, we loaded up & went to a nearby gas station.
12. I went into the bathroom & removed most of the little yellow thorns that were so painful.
13. To my dismay, I could only remove about half of the larger needles.
 - a. The rest had broken off under the skin and I couldn't get to them.
 - b. When I got home, I used a needle & tweezers and got the rest out after a lot of digging.
 - c. All but 4 that were so deep I couldn't get them out; 3 in my thigh, one in my thumb.
 - d. The 3 in my leg came out months later when they finally worked their way to the surface,

- e. But the one in my thumb never did come out.
- f. It took years to dissolve & hurt like crazy whenever I pressed hard.

B. Paul's Thorn

1. So when Paul speaks here of a thorn in the flesh—in a small way, I can relate.
2. His trial & the lessons he learned from it provide some important insights as we follow Christ.

C. Set the Scene

1. Paul is dealing with false teachers in this section.
 2. They fancied themselves as “super-apostles,” making wild claims of dramatic visions & special revelation from God.
 3. Paul was loath to engage in the silly claims & self-praise the false teachers were prone to;
 - a. But because he knew the Corinthians were impressed by that kind of thing,
 - b. He did it for their sake, though *personally* he found it distasteful.
 4. Since the false prophets were making claims of visions & revelations, Paul tells about his.
 5. Besides Jesus appearing to him at his conversion on the road to Damascus, Paul had a vision of heaven.
 - a. He's so put off by boasting, when he tells the story he refers to himself in the 3rd person,
 - b. And says he's not sure if it was a *vision* or he was *actually there*.
 6. Most commentators believe Paul was referring to the time he was stoned in Lystra on his first missionary journey.
 - a. Some trouble-makers riled up the crowd against Paul & stoned him.
 - b. His friends dragged his body out of the fray & stood round weeping.
 - c. They were sure he was dead, but after a few minutes he stood up. They were stunned.
 - d. Even more so when Paul made moves to go back to the very people who'd just stoned him so he could keep preaching!
 7. It's likely Paul *was* dead but God sent him back. During the brief time he was out, he was given a vision of the glory of heaven.
 8. *No wonder* when he revived, he wasn't afraid to go preach to the very one's who'd just killed him.
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9. While the false teachers *bragged endlessly* of their made-up visions & revelations, Paul says what *he* saw it would be *criminal* to try to reduce to words.
 - a. Imagine a 4 year old trying to describe the Sistine Chapel to someone who'd never seen it!
 - b. They'd have a much better chance than Paul describing heaven, so he says he won't even try.
 10. This stood in stark contrast to the false teachers who were *eager* to share what they claimed were the glorious truths of their visions.
 11. Paul was different from them in another way as he makes clear in vs. 7-10.

II. TEXT

A. V. 7

7 And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure.

1. While the *arrogance* of the false prophets was obvious, God had done a special work in Paul to *keep him* from the sin of pride.
2. The false teachers made no secret of their belief they were better than others. They called themselves “super-apostles.”
3. But *pride cripples* genuine ministry, so God had taken measures that held Paul *back* from it
 - a. The things God had shown Paul were so amazing, he was in danger of getting a big head.
 - b. So He took measures to help Paul keep pride at bay.
4. That help came in the form of a severe trial. Paul calls it a thorn in the flesh.
5. And note, he says it “was given” to him; it was a *gift*.
 - a. Without doubt, **at first** it didn’t seem to be a *gift*; it was an *affliction*.
 - b. At first it was no *blessing*, but a major *curse*.
 - c. But Paul eventually came to see it as a gift!
6. What was this “thorn in the flesh”?
 - a. The commentators are widely varied on their opinions.
 - 1) Some think it was *persecution* by the leader of the false teachers, referred to here as the messenger of Satan.
 - 2) Others think it was some *physical ailment*, maybe *malaria* or *migraines*.
 - 3) Some think it was some kind of *clinical depression*.
 - b. There’s some evidence in both Acts & Paul’s letters that he contracted a disease of the eyes.
7. Frankly, I’m *glad* we don’t know what the specific trial was.
 - a. It’s the *lesson* Paul learned *through it* that’s important.
 - b. If we knew what his distress was, we might think *only those* who had that same trial could learn the lesson.
8. Whatever it was, it was no small inconvenience.
 - a. When Paul speaks of a “thorn in the flesh” don’t picture a sliver, a rose thorn or a cactus needle.
 - b. The word in Greek refers to a ‘tent-peg;’ something Paul was familiar with as a tent-maker.
 - c. This was no slight irritation; it was a big deal, something that significantly altered the way Paul lived!
 - d. People with severe diabetes have to be very careful about how they live.
 - 1) They have to remember to check their blood.
 - 2) They have to watch when & what they eat.
 - 3) Diabetes is a condition that alters a person’s routine.
 - e. Paul’s thorn in the flesh had effected his lifestyle.
 - f. Because of this & the pain that attended it, whether physical or emotional, it conspired to open a door to the enemy to hammer away at Paul’s attitude.
 - g. That’s what I’m sure he means by “the messenger of Satan who beat him.”
9. My mother was a dear saint of God! I know few who were or are as godly as

- she.
- a. Several years before her graduation to heaven, she came down with a terrible case of shingles.
 - b. The wounds healed but the pain never went away, not for one second.
 - c. She lived with intense, unrelenting pain for several years until it eventually wore her out.
 - d. She lived her last couple years in Camarillo.
 - e. She was a prayer warrior, spending hours most days in intercession for others.
 - f. Though she was in pain, she maintained a strong joy in & love for the Lord.
 - g. But there were times, when she broke down & admitted to me that the enemy was hard at work to destroy her faith.
10. This is what happens when we face a protracted trial.
- a. The devil sidles up alongside us & begins to sow the seeds of doubt.
 - b. “Where’s God? You’ve born this thing a long time, long enough!”
 - c. “Maybe God doesn’t love you after all. Or maybe He’s not so good as you thought.”
 - d. “In fact, maybe there’s no God at all and you’re wasting your time with all this nonsense.”
 - e. “Yeah – you’d be better dealing with this by getting drunk, going out to the clubs.”
 - f. “Why not cope with some dope!”
11. Sitting here in church on a Sunday morning this all sounds rather silly, but if you’re in the middle of a long, hard trial, these thoughts feel just like Paul says, a battle, a beating.
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12. What did Paul do with this tent-peg?

B. V. 8

⁸ Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me.

1. It had *driven* him to prayer; an earnest, desperate plea for deliverance.
2. How many times did he pray like that? 3 times.
3. Please don’t think Paul means he *only* prayed about this 3 times.
4. No, he’d asked God *many* times to deliver him because this was a painful ordeal.
5. But there were 3 specific incidences when the suffering *was so great*, *desperation* took over & he *pleaded* with God for rescue. Note that’s the word he uses – he *pleaded*.
6. An example: Jim has a problem with anger. When he gets angry he says & does dumb stuff.
 - a. He loses his temper every once & a while at work but most of his co-workers just ignore him.
 - b. He sees how it’s harmed his relationships at work & slowed down his promotions, so every so often he asks God to change him.
 - c. He’s *mildly distressed* by his temper so he *prays mildly* for help with it.
 - d. But one weekend he blows up at his wife & 2 kids & throws a book at the

- wall.
- e. This freaks his wife & kids out. He storms into the garage to cool off & when he comes back 15 minutes later the wife & kids are gone.
 - f. He calls her on the cell phone asking where they are.
 - g. She says she's on her way to stay with some friends because she's scared of him & his outbursts which have become more common & violent.
 - h. **Now** when Jim prays, it isn't a mild, quickly muttered request. It's a desperate, heart-felt plea for God to do whatever He needs to deliver Jim from his sin.
7. Paul had been brought to this place not once, not twice, but 3 times.
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8. **Question:** Was Paul a man of great faith? Certainly!
Then why didn't God deliver him at the 1st request? Why not after the 2nd? 3 times in desperation Paul asked for help. / When it came, it was not as he'd hoped.

C. V. 9

9 And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness."

1. It was **this** that allowed Paul to **recast** the thorn in his flesh as a gift, not an affliction.
 2. **This** provided the awareness its presence wasn't for pain but for blessing.
 3. Ask Paul, "What are you about? What do you want to do with your life?"
 4. And he would say, "Serve God! Preach the Gospel, win the Lost. Plant churches. Teach believers."
 5. God knew this was his desire, so He kept him faithful by allowing this trial to endure.
 6. Without it, Paul would have grown arrogant by the revelations he'd had.
 - a. Pride would have ruined him, as it has many men & women.
 - b. God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble.
 7. And it's the grace of God that makes a man or woman effective.
 8. So God did what had to be done to keep Paul in the place where he depended on the grace of God.
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9. Let me share a little "behind the scenes" detail with you.
 - a. Some Friday's my study goes really well & I'm excited for Sunday because I know it's gonna rock!
 - b. Other times, I finish up Friday afternoon and say, "I hope the Rapture is tomorrow!" I'm not looking forward to Sunday because, well – it just doesn't seem like it's going to be that good.
 - c. I picture people throwing tomatoes, or mass slumber.
 - d. You can probably guess how it ends up.
 - 1) On those days when I'm **itching** to preach, & I've got all my clever stories & amazing illustrations – it just doesn't connect like I was envisioning.
 - 2) But on those Sundays when I'm convinced people are finally going to realize the gig is up & run me out of town, God moves powerfully!
 10. I can relate when God tells Paul His strength is made complete in Paul's

weakness.

- a. When I'm full of myself there's no room for God.
 - b. But when I'm empty, God pours His fullness in & does the work.
 - c. What people want, what they need isn't me – it's God, His power, His grace.
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11. Now, **when** did God tell Paul this? Only after his 3rd season of desperate pleading.
 - a. God didn't remain silent the 1st & 2nd times because He hadn't thought of a good reason for Paul's suffering.
 - b. This was the reason **from the start**, but God didn't bring Paul to understanding until after his 3rd plea.
 - c. The reason is for you & I, so we'd learn & be comforted.
 - d. God knew Paul would pen this one day & pass along these important truths.
 - e. Just as we read this & realize there **was** a good reason for Paul's trial, even though he at first didn't see it, so there's a good reason for the long trials we endure.
 - f. Even when God is silent, after in desperation we've pleaded with Him, He's there, & He's doing something.
 - g. Just as God was for Paul, He may be protecting us from some debilitating sin that would ruin us.
 - h. We look at the trial, the affliction, the pain & think it's going to destroy us – when in fact, **it's saving us** from something much worse.

 12. In a room this size, with this many people, there are certainly people here who suffer with their own tent-peg.
 - a. Whether it's physical, emotional, spiritual, financial, relational, whatever –
 - b. It's a painful trial that goes on & on.
 - c. You've prayed & asked for deliverance; not just mild prayers, but deep, desperate cries.
 - d. Yet the trial goes on. It may even worsen.
 - e. Along comes the enemy, pounding on you with his lies, suggesting you give up.
 13. Trust God! **Don't** give up! His grace is sufficient for you.
 14. And He will cause your weakness to be the opening through which He enters to accomplish something beyond your wildest dreams!
- 9b • Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.**
15. While the false teachers were bragging about how **strong** they were, because of what his suffering had taught him, Paul says he'd rather boast in his **weakness** because his inability was the platform upon which God could work.

D. Vs. 10

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.

1. Paul was no spiritual masochist who delighted in trials.
2. What he means is that because God **DOES** work all things together for good, he'd come to the place of seeing how even hardship & suffering serve a redemptive purpose.
3. Paul never *sought* pain. But when it came, he chose to see it through the eyes of faith, trusting that God allowed it for some good end.

III. CONCLUSUION

A. *We Need This*

1. We need this! We need what Paul says here because of the moment in which we live.
 2. From all indications, we're standing on the precipice of difficult days.
 3. Some contend they've already begun.
 4. As the doomsayers pronounce their reports of sorrow, let's not forget that our God is not limited by circumstances.
 - a. Heaven is not on the dollar system.
 - b. The angels do not invest in the stock market.
 - c. The lights of heaven are not powered by electricity.
 - d. And the food for the wedding banquet of Christ & the Church won't come from Von's or Ralph's.
 5. Our God who loves us with a perfect love is faithful.
 6. He knows precisely what we need & has pledged Himself to perform it.
 7. He knows your need of food as well as your need to be delivered from pride.
 8. He knows your need of work, as well as your need for holiness.
- Trust Him!