

My Grace is Sufficient for You

(Prayer in Times of Trouble)

2 Co 12:1-10

Key verses 8-9a “Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’”

In today’s passage, we learn that Apostle Paul had a thorn in his flesh which tormented him day and night. But in this passage, Paul bragged about it and delighted in it. How could he do so? Was he a masochist who loved to suffer? Not at all. But Paul learned to rejoice and even boast about his weaknesses because through it he learned to experience Jesus’ perfect power from his sufficient grace. How could Paul experience such power of Jesus and all sufficient grace in his weakness? It was through prayer. Paul learned to pray in times of trouble. Through this message, may the Holy Spirit teach us that *prayer is God’s appointed means of personally experiencing His sufficient grace and power*. May God give us the spirit of prayer so that we can truly pray.

I. Prayer in times of trouble (7-9)

Look at 7b. “I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.” By the time Paul wrote this letter to the Corinthians, the passage implies that Paul must have been tormented in his flesh for at least 14 years (2). It could have been chronic sickness or constant pain. No one fully knows what it was and when it started. However, the unarguable fact is that he was given the thorn while serving the Lord Jesus as his Apostle.

Some Christians expect that Christian life should be always sunny. They expect ease, pleasure, success, comfort, health and wealth- for are we not God’s blessed people? So then a good Christian won’t get cancer, or won’t get laid off, or our children won’t suffer from depression or troubles in school. However, if we think like this, we will be sadly disappointed and shocked when trouble breaks into our lives.

The Bible testifies about the inevitability and inescapability of trouble in our lives. While trying to comfort Job in trouble, his friend Eliphaz said, “Yet man is born to trouble as surely as sparks fly upward” (Job 5:7). Our Lord Jesus said to his disciples before his trial, “...In this world you will have trouble...” (Jn 16:33). Apostle Paul said to Timothy, “In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2Ti 3:12). He again said in Acts 14:22, “We *must* go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God.” Apostle Peter said to the suffering Christians, “Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you” (1Pe 4:12). No one on earth is exempt from trouble. Even our Lord Jesus Christ was known as a man of sorrows acquainted with grief (Isa 53:3).

If trouble is inescapable and inevitable to anyone who lives, what shall we do in times of trouble? Let’s see what Apostle Paul did. Look at verse 8. “Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me.” It was while praying, not once or twice but the third time that he received the clear answers from the Lord. In my opinion, however, how many times he prayed is not that important. What matters is he struggled with God in prayer until he received God’s answers. Otherwise, if he had not heard by the third time, surely, he would have prayed even

more. He also “pleaded” or “begged” the Lord. He did not say to God, “I have suffered so much to serve you and your people and this is how you repay me, with this additional trouble!” Instead, he pleaded with the Lord in humility. But his prayer request was very specific, not general and broad; He begged, “Lord, take it away from me!”

What do you do in times of trouble? In my physical pain, I first take painkillers. In times of trouble, I easily start complaining and get angry. What about you? Do you go to people to look for comfort? Do you try to ignore the trouble by sweeping it under the rug? Do you turn to other things to distract you from the trouble, by turning to Youtube or video games, or go on a vacation? Or do you try to solve the trouble on your own, by googling it and trying to find a solution? Many sincere Christians memorize and write down the Bible verses related to suffering. There seem to be many ways to cope with all kinds of troubles. But the nature of trouble is that troubles do not go away easily. They sometimes grow like rolling snowballs down a hill. James 5:13a, therefore, says, “Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray.”

While pleading with the Lord in prayer, Apostle Paul learned many things in prayer. I will summarize in four ways.

First, God helps us to fight the spiritual battle. During his prayer God taught Paul that this thorn in his flesh was from Satan. Thus, he called it a messenger of Satan, who is the Accuser and Liar. Satan not only physically tormented him through the physical thorn but also through a false message of God’s punishment for his past sins. Many times, in our troubles, Satan lies to us— “God doesn’t love you; God is punishing you for your sins; there is something wrong with your faith-- that’s why he isn’t healing you.” As Paul prayed, God revealed that his thorn was an opportunity for Satan to work in his heart. So God wanted and equipped Paul to fight spiritual battle against Satan through prayer. In prayer, Paul realized he should not listen to Satan and his lies of condemnation and doubt, but trust in God.

Where, by the way, do troubles come? According to the Bible, some troubles come from the fallen world; some come from our own foolish choices and sins, some come from others’ sins. Very importantly, some come directly from God himself to discipline his own children out of love (Heb 12:7). Some causes of trouble like the man born blind we don’t know. No matter the cause of our troubles, we have to be aware that Satan is always taking advantage of these troubles to deceive and lie and kill. But when we pray to God in our trouble, God enables us to fight the spiritual battle.

Second, God is in control. The passive tense of “I was given” shows that God is in control of all things, even the thorn in his flesh. God already knew what Satan wanted to do against Paul and God allowed Satan to do so. Sometimes, we feel that Satan is in control and overpowering the world as we experience darkness and grief of many kinds. But through prayer Paul was reminded that God has the power and wisdom to work in and on him through that very trouble. In fact, God is using trouble for Paul’s good. Thus, E. M. Bounds boldly says,

“Trouble is God’s agent, God’s servant, doing his will. Trouble is under the control of Almighty God, and is one of his most efficient agents in fulfilling his purpose concerning the highest welfare of the saints and in perfecting his saints. (E.M. Bounds, the Essentials of prayer)

Third, God always answers prayer. Look at verse 9a. “But he said to him...” The conjunction “but” simply indicates that God’s answer was “No!” God always hears our prayers- and answers them. God’s answers to prayers may not be what we want to hear. And if God

answers no, it's not because our prayers were necessarily wrong or unbelieving. I don't think Paul's motivation in his prayers was selfish, unbelieving or doubtful that God said no to him. Instead, we are sure that Apostle Paul submitted himself under God's will just as our Lord Jesus Christ did at Gethsemane as Christ cried out, "Take this cup from me; yet not my will but yours be done." And God, in his greater purpose and love, said "No," to Paul and even to his Son Jesus Christ. Overall, as we pray, sometimes God delivers praying people out of trouble. Other times, he doesn't deliver us out of the trouble. Rather, God gives strength to bear trouble. Always though, He gives comfort to us in our troubles and he always produces patience and renews our hope. No matter what his answer may be, God has already demonstrated his undeniable love for us; it is out of his love that he didn't spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all (Rom 8:35). Though God's answer may be delayed or is no, will you stand firm on the love of God that is in Christ Jesus and believe that God works for the best, and for the highest good of his praying people? (Rom 8:28)

Fourth, Jesus' immediate purpose in saying "No!" to Paul. Look at verse 7a. "Or because of these surpassingly great revelations. Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh..." Our Lord Jesus wanted to keep Paul from being conceited. As we read the book of Acts, Apostle Paul was the super apostle, the greatest evangelist, who pioneered many churches in Asia Minor and Europe. His wisdom in understanding and applying the gospel was deeper and greater than anybody else. He wrote half of the NT. What was more, he was caught up to the third heaven. He had many more amazing things to add to his resume. So it would have been easy for Paul to rely on himself, his wisdom and experiences and hard work and Bible knowledge. But when we become proud, we become useless to God and become a hindrance to God's work. So in God's mercy, he kept Paul from becoming conceited or self-reliant by allowing the thorn to be pierced in his body by the hand of Satan. Therefore, no matter Paul's successes and victories, through his constant thorn, he always came to God in full dependence and humility. And God alone was glorified through Paul's life.

As we review the things God taught Paul, we see that God revealed these things only as Paul came to God in prayer in the midst of his troubles. On the other hand, when we do not pray in times of trouble, we become easily unbelieving. We fall into Satan's temptations and lies. Doubts, fear and anxiety, rebellion and bitterness against God will grow like wild fire that destroys our faith and our lives.

When my MRI found two big tumors in my mid-brain, instead of coming to God with this trouble in prayer, I believed modern medicine would cure me completely. But it hasn't. Several nerves were cut while the tumors were removed. As a result, I suffer from constant muscle pain and double vision while the left-side of head does not function properly. After a few years of dealing with this thorn and trying to solve it on my own unsuccessfully, and struggling with doubts and anger, I am now learning to kneel before my Lord Jesus Christ in my desperation and helplessness. The more I come to him in prayer, the more I am filled with thankfulness that my Lord Jesus Christ has not given up on me by not healing me completely. Through this thorn, God has been drawing me into a deeper intimate love relationship with him and dependence on him. I thank God that he is teaching me to come to him in prayer. I hope I can pray as much as I have studied the Bible. I earnestly pray for myself and each of you that we may not waste God-allowed opportunities of troubles and that we may encounter the goodness of God and his love through them. May the Holy Spirit save us from prayerlessness and unbelief in times of trouble.

As you listen to this message, some of you may ask; should we pray only in times of trouble? Not at all! Apostle Paul says in 1Th 5:17, "Pray continually." The book of Acts and Paul's epistles describe him praying very often. What Paul did when he first met the Risen Christ and became blind? He prayed for three days (Acts 9:11). What did Paul do before he was sent out for his first missionary journey from the Antioch church? He prayed and fasted worshipping together with his brothers and sisters (Acts 13:2-3). What about when he was in prison at Philippi? About midnight, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God (Acts 16:25). Even more, when we read his epistles, we see that he prayed for the churches all the time, even in his last moments in prison. Prayer was essential for Paul. His prayer never ceased from the moment of his conversion to his martyrdom. May God bless us to pray continually.

II. My grace is sufficient for you (9b-10, 1-6)

If Jesus' immediate purpose through the thorn was to keep him from self-conceit, what then was Jesus' ultimate purpose? Let's read verse 9. "But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.'"

When Our Lord Jesus Christ said to Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you," he didn't mean, "Enough is enough! I died for your sins and forgave all of your sins so that you can have eternal life. I called you as my apostle. Why do you demand more?" Instead, when Jesus said, "My grace is sufficient for you," he meant that his grace is strong enough and powerful enough to fill any gap and inadequacy or weakness that Paul had. Jesus' grace is not static, or something we receive once. God's grace grows as much as it needs to give Paul as much unfailing strength and power as Paul needed, day by day and moment by moment to cover any of his weakness or pain.

Look at verse 9b again. "... for my power is made perfect in weakness." Some may say, "Lord, why do I have to receive your perfect power in weakness, not in health and wealth?" If you are healthy and wealthy and successful, you don't really need God's power that raised Christ from the dead. We can succeed on our own human strength and ability. But when we only depend our strength, God's resurrection power, his life-giving and life-changing power is not revealed. We are limited by our limits and our abilities.

But the reality is, we have many weaknesses. We may feel sad about and ashamed of our weaknesses. We want to hide them as much as possible and show off only our strengths. Who wants to feel weak, or inadequate, or not wise enough, or good enough? Who wants to feel incompetent or incapable? But deep down inside, we all have these feelings of inadequacy and weakness and failure. And in our weaknesses and failures, we often think that there is something wrong with us as Christians. As Christians, shouldn't we always feel and be victorious? Shouldn't we be more than conquerors? Shouldn't we be able to do all things through him who gives us strength? But our Lord Jesus Christ says that it is in our weakness that his power is made perfect. Therefore, the more weaknesses we have, the more opportunities we have to receive Jesus' perfected power.

Some may protest saying, "Though I have many weaknesses, I have not experienced his perfect power. What's wrong with me or God?" This is a very good question. Do you remember what Apostle Paul had been doing after he was given the thorn? Yes, he prayed until he could receive the very answer, most of all, the perfected power from our Lord Jesus Christ. That was what Paul did for his part. God's power doesn't come to us automatically. We need to pray and struggle with God! You have your own part in the process of sanctification. At the same time,

Christ Jesus does his part. In Paul's case, Christ engaged with Paul as he prayed and provided his power to him. In this way, the relationship between Jesus and Paul grew closer. As Paul drew nearer to Jesus one step at a time through prayer, so his Lord Jesus also drew nearer to him.

As their relationship grew nearer and closer, something amazing happened; his power was made perfect. His love was perfected, which implies that Jesus' power was growing and growing and finally reached its perfection or consummation. The concept of "Jesus' power is perfected" can be illustrated with the old pirate's telescope. Only when it is fully extended, one stage at a time can it function at full capacity and effectiveness. Likewise, Christ's power was fully unfolded to its perfection as Paul struggled with Jesus by the means of prayer. So Christ's perfect power is not revealed all at one time, or after one prayer, but through the process of prayer. Therefore, our Lord Jesus Christ had no reason to remove the thorn from his body. Paul had no reason to keep pleading for it. As Paul learned Christ's intention through the thorn, his prayer took a great leap of faith. At first, he had pleaded for the removal of the thorn. However, he was now receiving Jesus' perfected power from his sufficient grace through prayer. The more he prayed in times of trouble, the more power of God's grace flowed into his body and heart. Therefore, we can come to a conclusion that *prayer is a means of receiving God's grace*. Prayer guided by the word of God and empowered by the Holy Spirit is like a pipe that connects the heavenly reservoir of God's grace to us in weakness on earth. Do you have such a pipe? How big is your pipe? Is it blocked or frozen? Do you need a plumber? May God give us the spirit of prayer so that we can come nearer and closer to the heart of our Lord Jesus Christ and receive his perfected power from his sufficient grace.

As Apostle Paul learned to draw Jesus' perfected power in his weakness through prayer, his perspective of troubles completely changed. Let's read verse 10 together. "Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong." There is one thing he didn't mention in this verse: the greatest weakness of all- death. However, Paul's attitude toward death was not negative. He often said, "I die every day" (1Co 15:31-33); "To die is gain" (Php 2:21b); "We carry around the death/dying of Christ Jesus in our body" (2Co 4:10). Why? It is because it was in his greatest weakness, which is death, that he could draw and experience Jesus' resurrection power and life.

When Paul received Christ's perfected power and sufficient grace in his weakness, God used Paul who was constantly wracked with pain, to be the great Apostle Paul, evangelist to all the Gentiles through the full power of the gospel.

Do you want to experience his perfect power out of his sufficient grace? Then delight in your weakness, and come to Christ in prayer in weakness and trouble and suffering. Then surely Jesus' perfected power from his all-sufficient grace will flow into your heart and life and into the world, as a powerful witness of the gospel.