

2 Corinthians 12:2-10

Grace Sufficient

Paul speaks of the 3rd heaven, of a “thorn in his flesh,” and of grace sufficient. What do these ideas mean today?

Heaven

Life is pretty good presently. It is summer, the weather is a little warm for some, but this is the season of barbecues and baseball games, of sun tans and vacations. It is the time of the year that people sit on sandy beaches, or travel to visit family; there are pleasant excursions.

There are flowers and trees and blue skies and delightful rains. Traditional celebrations such as Independence Day mean outdoor concerts and fireworks and food. One is compelled to be very thankful.

It is hard to overstate the blessings we have been given, and I have yet to mention the spiritual side of things, the salvation that gives the material benefits of life such meaning. Having been encountered by the living God, we have been lifted up and healed and forgiven.

I am sure that most of us would not be inclined to speak of this encounter in the way Paul spoke did. Paul spoke about a mystical experience in which he

was “transported into the 3rd heaven.” I have to admit that I don’t think of heaven that way, having 3 levels. I simply believe it is an eternal paradise. Anyway, when Paul describes this encounter it reminds me of his conversion experience on the Damascus Road.

He was blinded by a great light and spoken to by a voice that said, “Saul, why do you persecute me?” I don’t know if that is the experience that Paul refers to when he says that he was transported in to the 3rd heaven, but he says that he was in paradise and heard inexpressible things.

Life is not only good because of the blessings of this life, but also because we catch glimpses of eternity. We must not fail to understand the significance of knowing about heaven. Although I am sure that Jesus wasn’t the first person to believe in the afterlife, the movement that goes by his name has given us a better understanding of the meaning of eternal life.

Pain

Yet one of life’s universal traits is that of suffering. I am not sure if we would interpret the painful experiences in life the same way Paul did either, but we all *do* have painful experiences.

There is no need to go into them in detail, we are each aware of our own circumstances. Have you ever noticed that no matter how good things are, there is

always something going wrong? And this is true both in the world as well as in our lives.

For some, the suffering in life is a major problem that messes up everything, ruins the pleasurable side of life. For most of us, we are willing to accept as a matter of course that there will be a certain amount of unpleasantness in life.

We all have sinned, after all; and we will all die, sickness and hardship is a part of life. We really only begin to rebel against it if the struggle seems excessive, like we are being given more than our fair share.

Perhaps the struggle is accepted as a form of punishment for sin *and* that God can redeem it and cause it to have a positive outcome. But few of us, at least outwardly, do what Paul did with his “thorn.” He says it as a way of keeping him humble in the face of his exceedingly great revelations.

No one knows what Paul’s “thorn in the flesh,” was, some kind of physical ailment. Whatever, it wasn’t fatal and did not inhibit too much, rather it annoyed him. He says he prayed three times that it be removed. And it was not removed.

Life is a series of surpassing revelations and accompanied by thorns. My guess is that most of us could fit our lives into these categories. The result

being that we are driven into a deeper relationship with God. We seek the meaning of it all.

Grace

Paul received his answer and so do we. And the answer was to depend wholly upon God’s grace and on nothing else for our emotional and spiritual well-being. *Grace is Enough.*

But as usual, there is more. The revelation from God in this text is stunning when you think about it, though it is tempting to read past it as if it doesn’t really say what it says.

“For my power is made perfect in weakness.”

One might reason that it would make more sense to say that God’s power is perfected in strength. When I think of power, anyway, I think of the way we use the term in athletic endeavors, the most powerful athletes are the ones who can hit the ball the farthest or lift the most weight, jump the highest, run the fastest, and we see examples of this kind of power all summer long:

The World Cup
Championship Golf
Wimbledon
The Tour de France
Baseball

Maybe these are not good examples. It is not enough to say that the most powerful do not always win because they miss the mark, lack precision, don't strategize well. We admire their power.

Paul says something different. He says he takes *delight* in weakness, because when he is weak, then he is strong, like in the song, "little ones to him belong, they are weak, but he is strong."

The first realization necessary is that, infatuated with power as we are, we are in reality all very weak and vulnerable. It is really rather pitiful what we think as power. It is only power in comparison to others who are also weak. Even those with money and political power are helpless in countless ways. Nature defeats them. Joy eludes them, simple morality is beyond their grasp.

When we acknowledge our weakness before God, then we *depend* upon God. Not in moments of religious ecstasy or high feelings when our tradition is feeding us the right words to say, but when in moments of calm we accept as an existential fact, a fact of our existence, that we are really very weak and helpless, so that it assaults our pride, then we are forced to ask for *help*, not superficially, but authentically, maybe even passionately, even as Paul begged three times that whatever the thorn was be taken away from him.

It is at this point that God is able to do for us far more than we ever thought or dreamed. It is at this point

where Paul concludes he is strong when he is weak, because divine power is perfected in human weakness. For Paul this truth is so real that he takes delight in his weaknesses, because, "when I am weak, then I am strong."

For me at least, the surpassing revelations, such as they are, are not remarkable enough to cause me to become conceited, but I am weak nonetheless. And whatever my circumstance no matter how I might pray for something to happen differently, I am most often left with the same answer Paul was given when he petitioned the Lord to remove his "thorn in the flesh."

Something like:

You are under grace . . . that is enough. This state of being under grace does not chain us to our circumstances, it liberates us from them. And it does not diminish God's power but unleashes it.

You are all under grace.

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