

1 Corinthians 12:9

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[0 : 00] We shall turn now to 2 Corinthians chapter 12 and words we find in verse 9. 2 Corinthians chapter 12 and verse 9.

But he said to me, My grace is sufficient for you. This morning already I have reflected on the congregation that sits before me.

And among them I am sure too some visitors and they very welcome us always. And I suppose the impression we make on those who visit is that here is a very prosperous and very successful and almost upwardly mobile group of believers who have a profound cause to praise God for all his kindness and who reflect lives of almost I suppose unbroken happiness and optimism.

And yet in every such gathering there are those who are finding it hard to cope. And for all our outward appearance of health and wealth and happiness there are doubtless heartbreaks and pains and anguishes as well.

I don't want to overstress that point because sometimes we seem to come to God only in moments of extremity.

[2 : 16] And it's so important to remind ourselves that the Lord is our shepherd there are so many times when we lack nothing and our cup overflows.

So it's quite wonderful to convey the impression that our discipleship is one simply of cost and of pain.

But it does involve those elements. And that's why this morning I want to turn to this particular text which says to us quite simply my grace is enough.

And suppose we take nothing else with us this morning there is surely sufficient aid for us to carry with us into the day before us and God spares us the week to come.

My grace is enough. I want first of all to notice this man St. Paul at this point in his life he is a man quite simply who is finding it hard to cope.

[3 : 37] And in many ways that is so remarkable and so encouraging for ourselves because he after all was an apostle a man of tremendous gifts a man of great personal courage of physical strength great powers of stamina endurance and resilience a man who had had tremendous experiences a man whom God and you saw mightily a man whom so many looked up in admiration and perhaps even in awe and yet this man was finding it so hard to cope because something had come into his life he calls it a thorn in his flesh we don't know in detail or precision what exactly it was it wasn't something sinful because at last

Paul is reconciled to it it may be something physical some limitation and a soul temperament perhaps something that dented his confidence something that made people seem as perhaps slightly ridiculous something which seems certainly to have been an impediment and a hindrance obstacle in the work of the gospel in which he was engaged because he speaks of it as a messenger of Satan indeed in a remarkable combination of words he says it was an angel of Satan it was something

God had sent and yet it was an angel of Satan and it was there to torment him or to buffet him and as Paul contemplated it his view was that it was such an impediment to his work and how much more effective he would have been in glory they sing weren't there and I wonder this morning against all of our crowd of prosperity how many of ourselves go to God with the same kind of complaint and you know many lives are there limitations or hindrances or impediments comparable to that which the apostle Paul faced not necessarily identical in its detail but the same in its effect and in its consequences and we're saying to

God Lord I just haven't coping I can't cope with this thing of course it's easy to identify great men and women of God in the post apostolic church who themselves labored under known handicaps as

they engaged in the work of the kingdom of God remember Martin Luther was black dog as he called it that depression that sometimes corrupt so relentlessly over his soul and reduced in him the most profound kind of paralysis and how often must he have said to God Lord can you not see the state of your church can you not see that I can't work in these conditions can you not change my temperament and personality and take this away from me dear

George Whitfield the great eloquent preacher smitten with asthma how often must he have said to God Lord I can't breathe I can't preach he told God to serve God in the face of his impediment and again to expulsion a victim of painful gout and recurrent depression carrying so many responsibilities all and above the preaching of the gospel we can reach out to some six thousand people until he must have said to God Lord we will take it away think of Johnny Erikson Tader as we were deemed imprisoned in this encumbrance of a body and would she be saying to [9 : 36] God Lord this which is a thorn in my flesh and almost more why and who I might serve you and who might have served you if only this impediment weren't there yourselves what impediments do we face perhaps this next year perhaps we stumble perhaps we have some physical problems perhaps we are victims of the most painful shyness perhaps we have our own black dog all of us in some way hindered by personal limitation and all of us wishing that at least something arise somewhere when eliminated some difficulty overcome some weakness removed that's what this man was this boy this man who wasn't coping this man who said to

God Lord I can't handle it and what did he do then I he said I went to the world three times about it three times I pleaded with the Lord now these are very important words because a part of that is to remind us that we pray as believers not only to God the Father but to the Lord that is to know Jesus Christ because he too is God and we worship him as we worship the Father and the Holy Spirit so off Paul went to the Lord and he told the Lord about this angel from Satan and he didn't simply go and talk about it and suddenly touched and prosaic way but he went to salvation and he pleaded in fact he went and he gave

God an exhortation and he exalted God and he appealed to God and he said I am going to appeal against this we are familiar with such language in an evil context and that's what Paul said I am going to launch an appeal against this impediment and this weakness in my life and so off he went and he appealed to the Lord and said Lord and the Lord said yes and he said I wanted taken away I just wanted removed I wanted not to be there and it said not a great thing but you and I can go to God and say to God Lord there's something in my life and something that you put in my life and I wanted removed reconciled to God's will how easily those words slip off our lips and how guilty we sometimes feel because we want things to be different and how tremendous and how releasing it is that here is this apostle of his sureness how he wasn't reconciled to it and how he wished that things were different and I say that it's a background of the Lord himself and his plea his appeal in Gethsemane Abba let this cup pass because he too wanted it to be different and so he went to the Lord and he launched his appeal and he told him I want you to remove it and he went not once or twice or thrice and I suppose that those three times represent not simply the number three but their persistent and the importunate prayer on this man as he longed to be rid of this particular impediment and so he lodged appeal after appeal after appeal with the Lord and said to Lord I love this removed and then we see what the Lord said well the Lord said no that's what he said it wasn't all that he said but it was the main thing that he said it's not that the

[15 : 24] Lord said nothing or did not sir but the Lord said no he said to Paul I'm not going to grant you appeal I'm going to leave that thorn there and I have said to you that with that thorn and despite that thorn you got to leave to my glory you got to accept that I put it there and I'm not going to take it away and I wonder this morning whether the Lord is saying to someone please stop asking me for that please stop pleading with me

I'm not going to change it and I'm not going to remove it it is going to stay that's what the Lord said but it wasn't all that the Lord said the Lord also led the apostle to see a reason for that form in his life and a function that that form had to perform in the apostle's existence and it was this it was given to me he says lest may be exalted above measure because Paul had had such privileges he had seen such revelations revelations which were unutterable he wasn't allowed to tell what he had seen you know you compare that to the revelation given to

John in the apocalypse and how glorious the missions that John received on the Isle of Patmos and yet you know John was allowed to tell them they were glorious so glorious and yet weren't unutterable and how much more glorious the missions that Paul was given have been when he

wasn't allowed to utter them and in a world where there was all kinds of talk about dukes and missions and prophecies and super super apostles it would have been so easy for this man to be exalted as he says above measure because you talk of missions he could have said I'll tell you about missions what I've seen where I've been in the body out of the body I don't know I have seen such things

God has shared such things and and he and he realizes suddenly that this thorn is performing a function it was there he says to keep them from being exalted above measure look he was exalted by them but not above measure now that may not always be the reason why there are those things in our lives although it may sometimes be just a mansion if we got our own way all the time how exalted if we had no obvious limitations and everything was so easy and so simple for us how exalted we might have been that may be the reason why God leaves things in our lives or there may be another reason and maybe if you talk to the

Lord about it you'll find out the reason why God has left this thing in your life so God said no and then God gave something of an explanation and then God gave them a tremendous assurance my grace is enough that's what God said to them at last and of course God defined that grace for him what he meant by grace my strength my perfect in weakness sometimes we think of grace as a mere sentiment or wish on the part of God but here grace is strength it's energy it's force it's power grace is the divine might operating in my life and in yours it is

[20 : 54] God himself us in every present help God the encourager God the enabler that's why Augustine spoke of grace as irresistible by which he meant that it was invincible and God was saying to the apostle what are you worrying about that little thorn I know it preaks and I know it so and I know it hurts that force that in comparison to my strength to the river of the water of life flowing through your soul the life of God in the soul of a human being my grace my strength surely that is enough my grace is enough and he says to the apostle by my grace and without strength he saying to you can cope with a thorn sure you can cope with a thorn but more he said despite that thorn with my grace with my strength and energy flowing through your life you can cope with all the demands that the kingdom of God makes upon you oh

Paul was saying to how can I preach with this how can I face an audience with this how can I confront those super apostles with this how can I lead or shepherd or serve the church with this and kind of saying to my grace is enough you may be saying how can I do my work with this how can I raise my family with this how can I keep going with this my grace is enough whatever Lord God asks you to carry whatever mountain

God asks you to climb whatever God wants you to cross whatever fire God wants you to go through whatever pain or temptation you have to face whatever the darkness my grace is enough my grace what's he saying to he saying to Paul I am enough I know of a slight little thorn say here night 724 heaven goes away but I am enough you cope with it undespise it you cope with anything you charge to do

God said something more to him God said this too my strength is made perfect in weakness weakness is the ideal context for the grace of God to operate in indeed for God himself to operate in and maybe that's what the thorn has done it's made Paul weak maybe by God's grace that's what the thorn is doing to you it's making you weak sometimes we want to stand beside God and we want to say to him it's ok Lord I can manage this one I can manage this one that's not how Paul felt Paul felt weak had

Paul been a presenter he felt weak been a son a teacher he felt weak been a preacher he did feel weak perhaps when he bore the vessels to go on sea journeys perhaps he could feel the sea sickness before he even stepped on the vessel to say to God so ok Lord I manage he knew he couldn't manage he knew he was weak limited frail incompetent so not independent maybe that day and by God's grace he could on so well and then the following day he had gone oh well I am in good form just now and he had fallen flat on his face he was weak and even only in that sense of frailty of all dependence of not being able to cope whatever it was the heroic public aspects of his life or the non-heroic private parts of his life where perhaps the thorn was at its most insistent that he had to be weak the thorn was a constant sacrament to him the sign and the seal and indeed also the communicator to him of the weakness that he needed the man who had been presenting appeal after appeal to the

[27 : 29] Lord he ends up the close of this particular section and he is boasting is boasting there is man who had said a few moments before that there was a terrible risk to be exalted above measure

of becoming boastful and now he's boasting despite all his warnings he's boasting but he's not boasting about his missions or his tongue speakings or his prophesying or his many converts or the many churches that he has founded but he is boasting in his weaknesses because these weaknesses drive him to God all the more gladly when

I boast about my weaknesses so that Christ's power may rest on me of course you can be weak and not be driven to Christ's power that's where Paul was feeling so incompetent no he couldn't afford to think of the impression he might make on people if he began to speak to them and yet turning from that and saying well I am so weak that I simply need God I can't face today or tomorrow without him shall we ourselves adopt the same position the same posture when I am weak then am I strong if in my weakness I say to God Lord you said your grace will be enough I'm holding you to that because at this moment I can hardly drag one foot after another but you said my grace is enough may God help us put our trust in him let us pray oh Lord we ask you to bless your word to us bless to us the knowledge it gives us bless to us above all the knowledge it gives to us of yourself and of your grace and bless all today who are struggling all feel weak and help us all to know that your grace is indeed enough for your glory sake
Amen May grace mercy and peace from God be upon each one of us now and everlastingly Amen