

2 Corinthians 12:1-10

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[0 : 00] Life can be difficult, nothing like stating the blindingly obvious.

But I wonder if being a Christian somehow shields us from some of the ugly stuff that is the bread and butter of human existence, be that sickness of body or mind, broken relationships, frustrated aspirations, being the victim of prejudice or injustice, and no doubt I could go on.

The reality that I think we all acknowledge, or I imagine that we all acknowledge, is that those afflictions, let's talk about a cancer or heart disease or some mental health problem, these afflictions are no respecter of persons.

Believers and unbelievers alike find themselves under the dark shadow of these afflictions. And that's true of the other afflictions that I mentioned and indeed many that I left unmentioned.

There is a difference though in the resources at our disposal to confront adversity. And there's one promise in particular that I want us to consider this evening and it's the words that we find in the passage that we read that the Lord addressed to Paul where he said this, My grace is sufficient for you.

[1 : 45] We want to get to those words but we're going to get to those words by giving some thought to the whole passage that we've read. Because that promise that God gives to Paul is a promise that is best understood in the context of the whole passage where I think we can identify what we're going to call three gifts that are given to Paul by God.

Not all of them are described in the language of a gift or in the language of giving but I think we can legitimately describe the three of them as gifts from God to Paul.

The three gifts that I identify here in these verses of 2 Corinthians chapter 12 are the following, the gift of knowledge, the gift of a thorn, and the gift of grace.

Three gifts from God to Paul. And we're going to think of each of them in turn and it's as we come to the final of the three gifts, the gift of grace that we'll be able to focus in on these words that are perhaps very familiar to us but perhaps not always understood by us.

My grace is sufficient for you. First of all then, notice with me how in this passage we have described or Paul describes the gift of knowledge that he had received from God.

[3 : 09] And I'm talking about the first seven verses of the chapter that are really rather difficult to get your head around in terms of what Paul is talking about. Now, we're not going to linger long on this gift but we do need to mention it because it serves as the context for the subsequent two gifts described and identified by Paul.

Now I'm calling the first gift the gift of knowledge because Paul speaks of receiving visions and revelations. There at the very beginning of the chapter in verse 1 I will go on to visions and revelations.

Maybe we do just need to take a quick step back and say that even this language, this rather strange language that Paul uses of boasting about these things, it is in the context of the opposition that he was under from within the church, those who were questioning his ministry.

And he is really making a defense of his ministry and he does so in this rather peculiar way of boasting in one thing or another, but then even as he does so acknowledging, well, they shouldn't really be boasting, but I could boast because it's true.

And there's this almost speaking to himself in the midst of writing what he's writing. But in that context, he does acknowledge that this gift that he had received from God was a gift of knowledge of revelations and visions.

[4 : 42] Now he doesn't reveal the content of these revelations, but it's clear that they provided Paul with knowledge that others were not privy to. And I want to notice three elements of this knowledge that he received, this gift of knowledge.

First of all, the source of it, but then also the manner of transmission, how he received it, but then also the content. And just very quickly, because we really want to move on to the next two gifts. First of all, the source of this knowledge, well, it's very clear. Paul himself tells us what the source was. I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord. Though, as we will see, the manner in which this knowledge was communicated was unusual, there's no doubt as to its source.

It was knowledge from God. So, that much is clear. What about the manner of transmission? Well, Paul received this knowledge by means of a God-given experience. He says there in verse 2, I know a man in Christ, and it becomes very clear that he's speaking about himself, even though he uses this rather roundabout language. I know a man in Christ who 14 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, and he goes on.

So, the manner in which this knowledge was communicated was this very unusual, this very amazing experience that was granted to him by God. It clearly had a very marked impact on Paul.

[6 : 24] Fourteen years later, it's still vivid in his memory. Indeed, that time reference is helpful because given what we know about when he wrote this letter to the church at Corinth, we can know that the the experience that he's speaking about isn't his conversion experience that would have been much earlier in his life, but some subsequent experience that he refers to here. We might call it a spiritual or even a mystical experience in its character. And the experience involved Paul being caught up to the third heaven or paradise, really just language to describe of being brought into the presence of God.

And but what did that look like? What did that involve? Well, the reality is that Paul himself doesn't know what it involved. On two occasions, he is clear that he doesn't know if it was in body or out of body. He doesn't know. Now, if he doesn't know, then there's very little prospect of us knowing.

And so, there's probably little merit in trying to speculate if the man himself doesn't know what hope of we of knowing. But it was an unusual experience that God granted to him by means of which he was given this gift of knowledge. We don't know what the knowledge was, which takes us to the third aspect of it, the content. And again, what Paul shares is nothing less than tantalizing. He speaks of inexpressible things. He speaks of surpassingly great revelations. But he is very clear on the fact that he's not going to tell us what it was, what this knowledge was, and we're left just hanging and wishing that we knew more. Maybe when you get to heaven, if you get to Paul before I do, then you can ask him and see what he says. But before then, it's a closed book. This is the first gift that he received, the gift of knowledge, revelation, visions, knowledge of inexpressible things, seemingly a knowledge that was for reasons best known to God denied to others, but that was granted to Paul. Which then takes us to the second gift, the gift of a thorn. Now, I don't know if you've ever given or received some pretty lousy gifts. I don't know if that's been your experience. In our house, one Christmas is remembered fondly as the year of the lousy gifts. I say remember fondly, that's not really true, but that's the way I want to express it. Now, I can't remember why that was the case. I don't know if funds were tight or if I was just overcome by a Scrooge complex, but our three boys received on this particular

Christmas, a dressing gown and a towel. Now, I think by any measure that's pretty poor in terms of Christmas gifts and how I am reminded of how poor those gifts were. But even a dressing gown or a towel looks good when compared to the second gift received by Paul that he speaks of here, a thorn in the flesh. Now, that is one unwelcome gift. And to be clear, the language used is explicitly of giving.

And notice there what Paul says in verse 7, there was given me a thorn in my flesh. Indeed, of the other two gifts, the actual verb isn't found though. I think we can legitimately call them gifts. But here it is very explicit. Paul speaks of this as a gift that he received, something that was given to him.

[10:15] But it was a very unwelcome gift. We want to think about this gift and there's three things we want to consider. We want to give some thought as to what the gift was, this thorn in the flesh. What was it?

What is it? What was it? But also, who gave the gift? Now, we've kind of already answered that, but it's worth exploring it a little bit more. And then thirdly, and maybe more significantly, why was it given? First of all, what was the gift, this thorn in the flesh? And the bottom line is that we don't know. Various suggestions have been made and are made as to what Paul is referring to when he speaks of this thorn in the flesh. And the different suggestions fall into three broad categories.

First of all, it suggested that this thorn in the flesh might refer to persecution or opposition that Paul encountered. Now, that was both from the outside, particularly from the Jews or the religious Jews in particular who very aggressively and vehemently opposed Paul and his ministry, but also from the inside, from within the Christian community, there were those who opposed him.

Indeed, this very letter is responding to some of those opponents. And how discouraging it must have been for Paul to face opposition from within. I imagine he was much better able to handle opposition from without, but from within it must have been, even for a man of his maturity and Christian character, it must have been profoundly discouraging. So, perhaps this thorn in the flesh refers to something of that nature. Another broad category that is suggested as a possibility is that the thorn in the flesh was spiritual in character, possibly some kind of temptation that Paul struggled with, and no doubt struggled with very faithfully, and yet it was a constant struggle for him and how he longed to be free of it because he saw it as something that was oppressive. He perhaps felt that it was something that was holding him back and his spiritual energies invested in confronting, resisting this temptation, whatever it might have been. Or maybe some weakness that he was conscious of. It's often suggested that he was a very poor speaker. It seems strange for us to say that of something like the Apostle Paul, but there are hints in the epistles that that was true. Indeed, in this very epistle, one of the things that his opponents in

Corinth were said, were saying that, you know, he writes amazingly. You read his letters, you think, wow, Paul, what a guy. But when you actually see him face to face, he's really not that great. And was that something that Paul struggled with? A sense of a weakness in terms of his capacity to communicate to a gathering. Well, we don't know. Or maybe the opposite temptation, a temptation to pride.

[13:19] He clearly was a very able man. He had been granted these amazing experiences, and that could easily have led him in the direction of pride. And of course, that's something that is explicitly stated as a potential danger, the danger of pride, the danger of conceit. And the third broad category that's suggested in terms of what the thorn in the flesh might have been is physical, some physical or mental affliction. It's often suggested, you've maybe heard the suggestion that it could have been Paul's poor eyesight. You remember in one of the epistles, he speaks about how he's using a helper, a secretary really to write out the letter. He takes it and others write it, and the reason being his poor vision. Or maybe something more complex, some physical or mental illness or affliction of one kind or another. Now, those who argue for some kind of physical affliction point to the fact that Paul describes it not only as a thorn, but explicitly as a thorn in the flesh. And that would seem to veer in the direction of some kind of physical complaint. Having said that, it's also worth noticing that the word thorn, the Greek word thorn, though only found on this occasion in the New Testament, there's no other occasion in the whole New Testament where that word is found. It is found on a number of occasions in the Old Testament that was available at the time at which Paul was writing these letters. And on the occasions where we find it in the Old Testament, not on every occasion, but on a number of occasions, it is used in a figurative sense of that which could cause opposition or difficulty or spiritual opposition to God's people. Let me just give you one example.

There are more than one, but just for reasons of time, just one example of how that word thorn is used in that sense in the Old Testament. In Numbers chapter 33 and in verse 55 we read, but if you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land, so these are the instructions to the Israelites as they are about to take possession of the land. If you do not drive them out, those you allow to remain will become barbs in your eyes and thorns in your sides. So, it's physical language, but it clearly isn't a physical affliction. It's people who would oppose God's people, pagan people worshiping pagan gods who would be a thorn in their side if they were not removed from the picture. And so, that might lead us to veer in that direction in terms of identifying this thorn in the flesh.

The bottom line, as I said at the beginning of our discussion of this, is that we don't know. It could have been any of these things suggested or something we haven't even thought about or suggested. And I suspect that Paul, directed, inspired by the Holy Spirit, is deliberately cryptic, so as to allow us to apply what he learned as a result of this thorn to any number of thorns that we might have to endure. Perhaps if it had been so specific as being one thing, then perhaps we would have said, oh, well, that's not my problem. I have another problem. And what Paul says, it doesn't really apply to me. And so, maybe that very fact that it's not so clear is even deliberate.

Who gave the gift? This thorn. Now, the language Paul uses when he speaks about being given this thorn doesn't explicitly identify the giver. There was given me is what he says. But I don't think there can be any reasonable doubt that God is to be understood as the giver of this unwelcome gift.

It's God who gives Paul this gift, as we're calling it, this thorn in the flesh. And yet, having stated that, and I think with some confidence, it's also true that Paul points to the involvement of Satan. In fact, the thorn is described by Paul as a messenger of Satan. There was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan. So, what's the deal? Is it God or is it Satan?

[17 : 57] Well, it's both. But the ultimate giver is God who uses Satan as the means of delivering this unwelcome gift, this thorn in the flesh. It reminds us of the story of Job and the manner in which God allowed indeed employed Satan to bring affliction upon affliction on Job, but with a good purpose in view. Why was it given? Well, it depends who you ask. I'm sure if you ask Satan why he was involved in tormenting Paul, then he would have answered that that was his objective, to torment Paul, and he succeeded.

Paul acknowledges that this was a torment for him. No doubt, Satan's greater objective would have been to frustrate Paul's gospel ministry. And at times, it might have appeared as if he was succeeding in this greater purpose. No doubt, there were times when it would have appeared that Paul was indeed being held back because of this thorn in the flesh, whatever it was. And Satan, no doubt, would have been very satisfied with the success of his tormenting of Paul by whatever means he was employing.

But if you ask God as to why the thorn was given, and God after all is the ultimate giver of the thorn, then the answer would be very different. Indeed, Paul's answer, once he had come to understand, would have been and is very different. The purpose of the gift was for Paul's good, to keep him from becoming conceited and to rely ever more on God. Now, it's a strange and perverse peculiarity, sometimes observed in believers, and we see it in ourselves, that the more God gives to us, the less we look to Him. Now, I'm not saying that's always true, but it is often true. The more He gives, the less we look to Him. And so, here it was God's purpose to spare Paul from that spiritually damaging outcome. And we need to just pause here and note in grateful awe the amazing power of God.

Satan, for all his bluster, is a puppet on a string being constantly brought to the tortuous realization that even when he does his damndest to torment and to frustrate and to destroy, the Lord orders for good and the fulfilling of His overriding gracious purpose.

The gift of a thorn. Finally, the gift of grace. And I'm in the same situation as the morning. I don't have a watch, so there you go. And those of you who weren't here in the morning won't recognize that reference, but I'm watchless, so I have no idea what the time is. But the gift of grace. Paul didn't like his gift, the second gift, the gift of a thorn. But despite his protestations, there was no returns policy on this gift. You know, harking back to the gifts that my sons received a few Christmases ago, I know at least one of them, who shall remain nameless, managed to exchange the dressing gown for something a little more appealing. But there was no such luck for Paul. There was no way in which Paul, even though he would have wished to, could return this particular gift. But more seriously, we read that Paul pleaded with the Lord three times that the thorn be taken away. And the very language that is used of this pleading of God speaks of the torment and pain that the thorn caused Paul.

[21 : 31] What was God's response when Paul pleaded for the thorn to be removed? Did he say no? No. Well, he didn't say no. He didn't say yes. But neither did he say no. Rather, what God did was remind Paul of another gift, the third gift that we want to notice, the gift of grace, the gift that quite literally keeps on giving. We sometimes speak about, you know, the gift that keeps on giving. Well, grace is the gift that keeps on giving. And what does God's gift of grace give to Paul?

And there's no doubt much that we could say about this, but I just want to identify three things that God's gift of grace gives to Paul in the midst of his pain and suffering and weakness.

First of all, it gives to Paul an assurance of God's love. While the word grace is used with somewhat different meanings depending on the context in the New Testament, it can never be divorced from its core sense of that which gives expression to the love of God for His people. So, when the Lord says to Paul, my grace is sufficient, He is reminding Paul, He is assuring Paul of His love. In the midst of His pain, in the midst of His suffering, in the midst of the mystery of Satan being allowed to torment him in the way that He is, God says to Paul, I still love you. Don't doubt my love. My grace is sufficient for you. But I think the second aspect of this gift of grace or the second thing that God gives to Paul is the promise and experience of God's power. A case could be made that the two statements made by God in verse 9, in addressing Paul, my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. These two statements, though distinct statements are parallel statements where the words grace and power in the two statements are almost synonymous, not entirely, but almost synonymous. That case could be made. But even if we shy away from that conclusion, it is certainly the case that God's grace is powerful. In salvation, when we see it in God's salvation, it is irresistible. We speak of grace as irresistible, and that is true.

There is a power in the grace of God. And in the Christian life, it is also powerful. It has the capacity to operate and overcome in the midst of weakness. In a manner that is beyond our capacity to understand, God's power is made perfect in weakness, just as Paul states, or as God states in his message to Paul. His love is sufficient. His power is sufficient. But the third thing that we hear God saying to Paul in this grand statement, my grace is sufficient, is that he will grant to Paul a joyful understanding of God's purposes and God's ways. Ultimately, how was Paul able to operate and overcome his thorn in the flesh? Even as it remained painfully embedded in his very being, whatever it was, it was still there gnawing away at him, and yet he was so able to overcome.

He was able to serve. He was able to be used of God. How was that? Well, the reason he was able to is that he was brought to the place of understanding, to see God's greater purpose, and that that greater purpose was to keep him humble, as he himself very explicitly says, to keep me from becoming conceited. He understands the reason. I don't think there's any worse pain than pain that is not understood, a pain that seems to be without reason. And so often pain is like that. It's so difficult to understand what possible purpose can there be in this. Maybe as Christians we say, well, yes, we know that there must be, but I really can't see it.

[25 : 47] And we're not always granted the capacity to see the purpose. But what certainly helped Paul, and God's grace enabled him to come to this point, and that's this point of understanding, of understanding God's purpose, of keeping him humble, of keeping him close to God, of God working through his weakness. Grace gives understanding. And when we bring it all together, these three elements, and assurance of his love, the promise and experience of his power, a joyful understanding of God's purposes and ways, when we bring these three things together and try to capture what God is saying in few words, we could do a lot worse than conclude that what God is saying is this, I am sufficient for you. When he says, my grace is sufficient for you, he's saying, I am sufficient for you. If you have me, you have enough. You don't need anything else. You have me. My grace is sufficient. I am sufficient. Well, let me close with just a word to unbelievers and believers.

I don't know what you are, but whatever category that you fall into, as you understand it, let me just say something to you. If you're not a believer, can I commend to you the grace of God, but especially the God of grace. Life is difficult. And I can't promise you that if you put your trust in Jesus, you'll be spared pain and suffering. I don't promise you some magic wand that will deliver you from affliction. The Bible doesn't promise that. God doesn't promise that. But what I can assure you is in the midst of the pain and suffering, God's grace will be sufficient. God will be sufficient for you. And to believe this evening, I have little or possibly no clue what you are going through, but I would encourage you to take on trust the words of the altogether trustworthy one.

Father, my grace is sufficient. I am sufficient now and always. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word. We thank you for yourself. We thank you for who you are. We thank you for your grace. We thank you for your deep love. We thank you for your power. We thank you for the manner in which you bring us to a place of understanding, of being able to detect if only in a measure, your greater purposes for us in and through and in the midst of pain and suffering. With Paul, we would plead with you to deliver us, and we have every right to do so. You welcome those prayers seeking deliverance. And in your good and perfect will, there are times when you grant us deliverance in the heat and now. And for that we are grateful. But we also acknowledge, we also recognize there are times when you do not grant the release, the deliverance that we would want. And you come to us as you came to Paul with these words, my grace is sufficient, for my power is made perfect in weakness. Help us to hear those words. Help us to, in some measure, understand them. Help us with Paul to be brought to that place of grateful understanding, indeed of being able to boast in weakness, in insult, in hardship, in persecutions, because of this conviction that we have been brought to, for when I am weak, then I am strong. Amen.