

## “Sufficient Grace”

2 Corinthians 12

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**2 Corinthians 12 - 1** *It is doubtless not profitable for me to boast. I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord: 2 I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago—whether in the body I do not know, or whether out of the body I do*

*not know, God knows—such a one was caught up to the third heaven. 3 And I know such a man—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows— 4 how he was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter. 5 Of such a one I will boast; yet of myself I will not boast, except in my infirmities. 6 For though I might desire to boast, I will not be a fool; for I will speak the truth. But I refrain, lest anyone should think of me above what he sees me to be or hears from me. 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. 8 Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. 9 And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. 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. 11 I have become a fool in boasting; you have compelled me. For I ought to have been commended by you; for in nothing was I behind the most eminent apostles, though I am nothing. 12 Truly the signs of an apostle were accomplished among you with all perseverance, in signs and wonders and mighty deeds. 13 For what is it in which you were inferior to other churches, except that I myself was not burdensome to you? Forgive me this wrong! 14 Now for the third time I am ready to come to you. And I will not be burdensome to you; for I do not seek yours, but you. For the children ought not to lay up for the parents, but the parents for the children. 15 And I will very gladly spend and be spent for your souls; though the more abundantly I love you, the less I am loved. 16 But be that as it may, I did not burden you. Nevertheless, being crafty, I caught you by cunning! 17 Did I take advantage of you by any of those whom I sent to you? 18 I urged Titus, and sent our brother with him. Did Titus take advantage of you? Did we not walk in the same spirit? Did we not walk in the same steps? 19 Again, do you think that we excuse ourselves to you? We speak before God in Christ. But we do all things, beloved, for your edification. 20 For I fear lest, when I come, I shall not find you such as I wish, and that I shall be found by you such as you do not wish; lest there be contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, backbitings, whisperings, conceits, tumults; 21 lest, when I come again, my God will humble me among you, and I shall mourn for many who have sinned before and have not repented of the uncleanness, fornication, and lewdness which they have practiced.*

12:1

Paul was certainly not one to brag about himself. All of it...the whole life journey, was clearly never about him or his achievements. Those who came against Paul, no doubt played him off as a lightweight. After all, he just taught the *Bible*. **They** had special revelations and visions! **They** had an exclusive and unique place before God, or at least they *believed* they did!



Many folks are quick to make similar claims today and attempt to use them for their own advancement and self-glory. This is what is behind every cult and behind every false teacher. Anyone can claim special position and standing via some unique experience, especially when those experiences cannot be confirmed by anyone else! Especially in our internet age where we can blog, Twitter, and Youtube from a great distance from anyone who might call you into question. Such is a much harder sell ...*albeit a much more accurate picture*, to be judged up close by our words and our actions each and every day of our lives, especially over the long haul.

12:2-4

Paul is herein no doubt speaking of an event that happened 14 years prior, recorded in the book of Acts, where he was literally stoned to death outside the city of Lystra. Yet in humility, Paul speaks of himself in the third person, because it was the power of God *behind the event* that Paul wanted the focus on, not himself.

Once again, it was clear that Paul was not looking to draw attention to himself. If he was, he wouldn't have waited 14 years to speak of the event. He would have went on a conference tour. In that day, it was common to speak of three heavens: The first is the sky where the birds fly, the second is the place of the sun, moon, and stars, and the third is where God dwells.

The phrase "caught up" found here is the same word where we get "snatch away" in Greek or in our modern vernacular, *rapture*. Paul seems uncertain as to the details of what occurred, but he did know that suddenly he was home, the place of God, *paradise*. The particulars of what exactly occurred there in the third heaven, the things he heard and saw, were to be his private blessing and were not shared with others. How refreshing and rare a concept that is today, especially in so many individuals and churches!

12:5-7

Paul could have, like so many others who have followed, bragged about such events and the things God communicated to him. But Paul did not want his *experiences* to be the sum of who he was, *even if those events were true*! With such experiences, come the inevitable emotions, and *that ground is always dangerous*. Paul wanted rather to be known by his character, the fruit of his life, that which others saw in him and heard from him every day.

But apparently, *just to make sure*, God gave Paul a "thorn in the flesh." In truth, it seems that God went so far as to have *allowed* Satan to bring this thorn upon Paul. It was allowed so that Paul's pride would not overtake him. Paul, in his humility, acknowledged that he was indeed a man like anyone else and could therefore be apt to glory in himself for the things that had occurred in his life and ministry. But God, *in His love for Paul*, did not allow him to drift into such a dangerous and damaging territory.

Such is one of many scriptural instances that dispel our modern ideals that says a relationship with God brings us a soft path and comfortable journey through life. It seems we invariably want to place *our* humanistic concept of love upon the deity of love. We ironically want to teach the *Embodiment* and *Creator* of love what love is and how He should love us! I consider this one of the biggest problems that face the modern church and the modern Christian today.

Just what this thorn exactly was, we do not know. There has been much conjecture over the years from the scholar to the novice. Some think perhaps it was bad eyes, having never healed back to their pre-Damascus road state. Some have proposed malaria, a speech issue, or even migraines. Some have even suggested it was simply the constant attacks from those who were supposed to be his brethren. We do not know *what* it was, but we do know how much it troubled him. For the word we have before us that is translated “thorn” is literally the biblical term for tent stake! So we can know that this was not a small, insignificant issue for Paul, but rather a painful weight he carried every day of his ministry.

It is clear however, that Paul, *though he could have*, did not want to pen record of the specifics. Perhaps he understood the human tendencies of how we can place undo focus on such details. The bottom line is that this “thorn” kept Paul dependent on God rather than on himself. Whether we want to admit it or not, in times of weakness we naturally lean upon God all the more and look to Him to carry us through the difficulties. While the truth is He chooses at times not to *remove* the pain, He **has** promised to carry us through it, and to *never put us through more than we can endure*.

He could have tried to make a run for it. Many people do. We each must decide and commit to hang tight with Christ in the midst of the fires. Because if we want to run, He will let us. But He won't go with us. He will remain where you peeled off, with his hand open and calling your name. Adam and Eve are perfect examples of that. We must consider the words of Christ when He said “*he that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved.*” To endure means “to remain firm in a commitment to be true to the commandments of God despite temptation, opposition, and adversity.”

It's ironic that the sole reason Satan was cast out of heaven in the first place was his pride, yet God literally uses Satan's pride to subdue that pride in others. This leaves us little doubt of just who is in control.

12:8-9

Our natural tendency is to avoid the “thorns” whenever possible. Our prayers are rarely, “*Thy will be done,*” but are usually, “*My will be done.*” That basically means, “Get me out of here, give me an easy road, and relieve me of all uncomfortable situations.”

Such a human response is not some terrible sin, but rather a quite natural response. It is a “human” response. Let us not forget that Paul himself asked God if his thorn could be removed. And there is nothing wrong with asking! James tells us that “*...you don't have what you want because you don't ask God for it.*” But it also goes on in warning saying “*And even when you ask, you don't get it because your motives are all wrong — you want only what will give you pleasure.*” (James 4: 2-3)

However, please note that the “*God of Love*” said “**no.**” That is an crucial point when there are so many who say that God answers every prayer in the affirmative every time. Like He is a big genie in a bottle. But know this: In such a scenario, *we* become God and our Creator becomes subservient to us and our every whim.

While God does indeed answer every prayer, His answer can be *yes*, *no*, or *wait*. If you do not get this, you are going to have a painful and frustrating struggle through this life. We may not like the ramifications, but God told Paul no *because* He loved Paul! Yet God did not leave him hanging helpless. God gave him the grace to endure it. It's funny how we in our day see grace as a "get-out-of-jail-free" card when in truth grace is often actually the ability to **stay in jail!**

Shadrack, Meshach, and Abednego had it right. They asked God for a rescue, but unmoved they refused to compromise or surrender no matter the answer: "*O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God whom we serve is able to save us. He will rescue us from your power, Your Majesty. But even if he doesn't, we want to make it clear to you, Your Majesty, that we will never serve your gods or worship the gold statue you have set up.*"

This concept may be...*and often is*, summarily rejected by many people, but know this today...it *is* true Christianity. It's not the modern "pop" version so many are dishing out today, but the real and biblical version designed and blessed by God Himself. Prayer is not to get *our* will done, but to have God's will done in us and through us. Yet for most of us, it's not *His* world we want to change, but ours.

12:10

Ok...we might be willing to tacitly accept all of this, but "*take pleasure?*" We tend to look at this list and stand incredulous at the idea that we should take *pleasure* in any of it! I mean, what is that? It is some sort of weird sadistic practice?

The key here is the phrase "for Christ's sake." Our joy is not to be motivated by human pleasure or the lack thereof. Our endurance comes from the desire to do all things, whether in joy or difficulty, "*for Christ's sake.*" But we need to face the music: Are our lives an attempt to live for *our* sake, or for *His*?

Paul knew the critical "piece of the puzzle" of a disciplined life. It isn't education or deep theological training. But rather it is complete dependence upon Christ. The idea isn't that we purposely seek out pain or some sort of spiritually weak 'meltdown' so God will come to our rescue. That's testing God, and He warned us clearly to not do that. Rather, it is the daily walk in the utter dependence upon Christ, the knowledge and the *living* that we are lost without Him, *come what may...*

12:11-12

The situation in these passages were not Paul's idea of great communication and dialogue. He was clearly uncomfortable with the whole matter. But it is obvious that he felt he had to defend his honor, his ministry, and the sheep under his care.

Sadly, his heart of love was not returned. Paul had not received the love and support from this body of believers that should have righteously come his way. Not simply because he was the founding pastor/evangelist, but because the power of God had clearly been manifested in their midst *through his ministry and life*. The hand of God had worked through Paul in the presence of these Corinthian believers. They had all witnessed the power of the Spirit in his ministry.

There were those in Corinth who had done everything in their power to bring Paul down, and none of it was even remotely godly! The attacks were never over doctrine, scripture, or overt sin in his life. Rather, it was Paul's ministry style and human qualities that some did not like, *despite the fact that much spiritual fruit had been produced via that ministry style and his qualities.*

All of this ruckus had not only hurt Paul, but had caused severe dissension within the church of Corinth. It seemed that as Paul wrote this letter, the church had reached a critical point: **pull up or crash.** Paul was calling the Corinthian believers to stop and look around. Had God been working in their midst or not?

12:13-14

It appears that the church in Corinth felt they had somehow been disrespected. There apparently was some people there who just couldn't be pleased. It seemed that this flock was determined to be unhappy; it appeared that whichever way Paul turned, they came attacking his position. Thus Paul was stuck "between a rock and a hard place." He was a prisoner of some spiritual children who were stomping and kicking to have their own way, *even if they didn't know what that was.*

Despite the outcome, Paul was unflinching. He was going to make sure that no matter what *they* chose to do, *he* would not be compromised. Paul tells them, *while at the same time laying down the foundation of ministry for every pastor who would follow him,* that he doesn't want their stuff, **he wants them!**

12:15-16

Paul was willing to not only **be** the sacrifice, but to sacrifice also. It was not a "response" love, but a love that acted whether it was reciprocated or not. In all the negative things they accused of Paul, serving for personal gain or position wasn't one of them. His hands were clean. He had took upon himself the mantle of Christ love, wherein he would love and serve, even if no like response was forthcoming. Like Jesus, Paul would love *sacrificially.*

12:17

Paul is not herein hiding behind protocol or position. He is being transparent...willing to lay everything out in the open for all to see. He asks the question directly, having nothing to hide: *"Did I take advantage of you?"*

There are many people who shun the light of day when it comes to tough questions. At all cost they will avoid open discussion and dialogue. That's why they run away. It's easier to send nasty emails and anonymous letters, to gossip and embrace subtle innuendos. These folks don't want to talk because they may have to defend themselves, explain themselves, and perhaps be proven wrong and have to repent. John 3:19 "...*they loved the darkness more than the light, for their actions were evil.*" However, Paul was not one of those people. In him was no deceit. He was open, forthcoming, and had nothing to hide.

12:18

Notice that Paul was not "flying solo." Those who do should be immediately suspect. Paul sent Titus and another brother to Corinth to deal with the financial issues, but what did the Corinthian

believers get from these guys? They got Paul, just in a different skin! Because Paul, and anyone who worked with him, had a couple of overwhelming character traits: *consistency and unity*. Paul and Titus walked in the same spirit, they walked in the same steps. They were brothers, fellow servants, united in spirit and focus.

12:19

Perhaps those in Corinth were apt to step back and accuse Paul of weaving this web of issues in order to cover his back. Maybe they could say he was putting a spin on the situation to make himself look good. No doubt there were those who chalked him up as a fast talker, a guy who knew what buttons to push. How could he defend himself without only perpetuating the original accusation? Anything he could say would only be skewed as “thou protesteth too much.” (Shakespeare)

Despite the potential kneejerk reaction, Paul is going to say it anyway. He says in effect, “*What we speak, we speak before God. Everything we do, we are doing for you because we love you and want you to be blessed and to grow in maturity before Christ.*”

12:20-21

Paul seemingly shuddered at the possibility of what could be waiting in Corinth. He longed for it to be a time of fellowship and rejoicing, but feared he would find division and carnality, all the things easily found in the world.

Sadly, so many fellowships today are filled with those ways of the world. Yet somehow because we are in church or part of a church, we think we are exempt from the reach of consequences and liability. Literally, we are apt to believe that because we are in a body of believers we get a *greater* latitude, a *longer* leash, instead of realizing that the truth is really the opposite! Instead of disciplining ourselves, we so often give ourselves a special dispensation: a special permission to sin.

Yet we are reminded in 1Peter 4:17, “*For the time has come for judgment, and it must begin first among God’s own children.*” To find these problems in Corinth would cause Paul to *mourn*. This is a pain that few outside of the ministry would ever understand. Apparently those in the Corinth church were indeed practicing these things, and Paul knew that scripture says clearly, that those who practice these things will not inherit the kingdom of God (1 Cor 6:9). What would Paul find?

**What would he find in *this* church?**