

The Thorn in the Flesh

By Dave Roberson

The Apostle Paul understood and taught on Grace from the experiences he had! If there was ever a man other than the Lord Jesus Christ who earned the devil's attention, it was the apostle Paul!

Writing to the Church at Corinth, Paul talked about the devil's attempts to defeat him in 2 Corinthians 12:7:

“And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the measure of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure.”

This verse sums up and records one of the greatest onslaughts ever launched against a man. Paul went on to say:

“For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. And He said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made Perfect in weakness. Most gladly will therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, That the power of Christ may rest upon me. (2 Corinthians 12:8-9)

The devil assaulted Paul in an all-out attempt to stop him, throwing at the apostle all the wiles he could muster up, conceive, and contrive. In addressing this attack, Paul called it a “thorn in the flesh.” Paul said in effect, “Because of all the revelation knowledge that has been bestowed on me, there has been given to me a thorn in the flesh. This thorn in the flesh has come to keep me from gaining any kind of credibility, and from being exalted in anyone's eyes. Everywhere I turn, there he is. I sought God three times, asking Him to remove this thorn, but three times He answered me. **‘MY GRACE IS SUFFICIENT.’**”

Paul concluded by saying, “I would rather glory in my infirmities—in my weaknesses as a man and in the limitations imposed on me by this flesh. For when I am weak, then am I strong. In fact, the Lord told me that His strength is perfected in my weakness. I will therefore take pleasure in infirmities, distresses, and perplexities!” (Vs. 9-10).

What an incredible statement that God made in response to Paul's request: **“MY GRACE IS SUFFICIENT”** and God didn't say that once to Paul,--He said it three times!

This is what fascinates me the most about this passage of Scripture. Paul was a man of great revelation knowledge, understanding, and spiritual stature. Yet, God had to emphasize the power that is in His grace three different times before Paul finally understood what God was trying to get across to him! If Paul had to hear the same message on grace three times before he got the revelation, I suspect that you and I could easily be missing a great deal of truth about grace.

God has pulled my shirt into this subject time after time over the years. As I meditated on those words, **“MY GRACE IS SUFFICIENT”**, I came to realize the difference between the man in Mark 4 and the man who took Paul's route.

In Mark 4, it says that after the sower sowed the Word, immediately Satan was able to come and steal the Word. Similarly, Paul said in Second Corinthians 12, **“Because of the abundance of my revelations, this attack came.”** In other words, Satan came immediately to steal the Word. That's what the devil was after in Paul's life. Satan not only wanted to destroy the Word in Paul: he also wanted to destroy Paul's influence in the eyes of the people. That's why Paul said, **“I am perplexed about you Corinthians. I can't believe you are desiring proof that Christ is speaking through me!”**

So the devil was after the same thing in Paul that he is after in us—**THE WORD OF GOD**. Of course Satan was seeking to stop Paul with a greater degree of intensity, for Paul was more worthy to be stopped than we are at this point. Yet even for a man of this stature, it took God three times to make Paul understand: **“MY GRACE IS SUFFICIENT”**.

When the Word is sown, the devil comes for one reason: He wants the Word that has been planted in your heart. Satan desperately wants to steal the Word because he knows it is the Word that will bring you all the way to victory!

Because the devil wants the Word in us, he will bring persecution, affliction, and the cares of this world, hoping that we may get offended and go the way of these devices. If we succumb to Satan's temptations, he will then be able to steal the Word and keep it from working in our lives; but Paul was not about to take that route. He said in verse 9, **"Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities..."** Paul also said in Romans 5:3: **"...We glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience."**

James confirmed that this is the way the believer is to respond to Satan's attacks: **"My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers [different kinds of] temptations** (James 1:2).

Although Paul needed three times of divine reassurance, he put his feet on the rock and lifted his voice toward Heaven. In the midst of hell, on the edge of death, when he was about to be thrown to the lions or killed by a raging coppersmith, Paul learned a crucial spiritual key. In the midst of the most adverse and backward circumstances, Jesus' strength would be perfected in his weakness as he lifted his hands before God, glorified and praised Him in a loud voice, and worshiped Him hour after hour. This was the response to the devil's attacks that would activate grace in his life and trade his standing of weakness for God's standing of strength.

This is the same response by which we can trade **our** weakness for God's grace as well. His grace is something we cannot merit or earn in any area of our redemption—and that includes deliverance from present circumstances.

What we could get no other way, God has given freely to us through Jesus; therefore all our works—all we do for Him—must be born out of a relationship based on the knowledge that first of all, God has done the impossible. He has saved us. And as we learn to focus on our attention on Him, praising and worshiping Him no matter **WHAT** is going on around us, our souls will eventually begin to look to Him for His grace is a basis for everything we do and everything we receive.

We are taught to understand grace in the realm of the afterlife; as a result, we believe God's grace is sufficient to take us across the barrier of physical death; but He also wants us to understand that grace is also sufficient! Death still surrounds us as an inescapable reality, for it will be the last enemy to be put under Jesus' feet. Positionally, death is already under Him for those who believe; nevertheless, death is evident on every hand.

Ever since the fall of man, the world has had to reconcile itself to death. We see it every day; the news is full of it. Thus, we as believers have been forced to lay hold of grace and to trust it to take us across the barrier of physical death. Because of the inevitability of death, we have been forced to say, **"HIS GRACE IS SUFFICIENT"** as we look toward the time that our lives will end on this earth.

But we have **NOT** understood that God's grace is sufficient in every hellish situation on **THIS** side of glory in the present realm. And we have failed to recognize the power in this untapped resource about which we know so little—that is, praise and worship in the midst of adverse circumstances. The truth is, praise and worship seems to be the primary function in activating grace and in trading Jesus' standing of strength for our standing of weakness. The more I learn about the wonders of that divine grace, the more I feel like shouting!

We have been examining a man who experienced the worst that hell could throw at him. All the attacks that the powers and principalities of hell could ever muster, conjure up, conceive, contrive, and throw at a man were thrown at Paul. Yet in the midst of it all, God had one message for Paul that He stressed three different times **"GRACE IS WHERE SUFFICIENCY LIES."**

Yet in the midst of it all, God had one message for Paul that He stressed three different times: **"GRACE IS WHERE SUFFICIENCY LIES."**

In the 2 Corinthians 11: 23-28, Paul describes some of the attacks that the devil leveled against him:

Are they ministers of Christ? (I speak as a fool) I am more; in labours more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequent, in deaths oft. Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered, Thrice I suffered shipwreck; a night and a day I have been in the deep; In journeying often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, In perils in the city in perils by mine own countrymen; In perils of false brethren; In weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness. Beside those things that are without, that which cometh upon me daily, the care of all the churches.

Think of it! In the midst of all these adversities, there was one weapon that God singled out and revealed to this apostle in order to enable him to stand up under and defeat every attack: **THE GRACE OF GOD**. Through it all, God kept repeating the same message: **“MY GRACE IS SUFFICIENT”**.

In the same way, you can turn the grace of God into a weapon by enlisting it against **YOUR** problem. As God said to Paul, He also says to you: **“YOUR SUFFICIENCY LIES IN MY GRACE!”**

The instructions to activate this grace of God are incredible. God says that in the middle of the worst that Satan can throw at you, you are to stand up and glorify and praise Him in your weaknesses and your limitations as a human being. You are actually to take pleasure in your infirmities and your limitations as a human being. You are actually to take pleasure in your infirmities and your perplexities. Why? Because God's strength will be perfect in you in the presence of your weakness!

Somehow you activate Grace when, in the middle of a test, you praise and glorify God with your heart. As you do this, you strip yourself of your dependency on the flesh and place your dependency on grace, which is God's standing. The moment that happens—the moment you trade **“YOUR STANDING FOR HIS”**—**YOU BEGIN REIGNING OVER YOUR PROBLEM... That's why the Word of God says “when you are weak—then you become strong!”**

This spiritual principle is revealed elsewhere in the Bible as well. Psalm 8:2 says:

“Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings hast thou ordained strength because of thine enemies, that thou might still the enemy and the avenger. But in Matthew 21:16, Jesus quotes this same verse a little differently, saying, ...Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings thou hast perfected PRAISE...ALSO, in Ephesians 5:18-19 says: ...Be filled with the Spirit; speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your hearts to the Lord. [To be filled with the Spirit is to be filled with strength, power, wisdom and with boldness]

When we truly have our eyes on God, we see how big He is and how small our problems compared to Him. Just as the old familiar song says, *“Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in His wonderful face, and the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace.”*

When our eyes are upon Him, we stop worrying and fretting and getting in God's way. Anxiety and fear depart; instead, peace and love dominate. Also, that when fear is present, our minds can become unsound and confusion can reign. But when we focus on God by an act of our will, a stillness and a quietness settles in. Our path becomes directed by the Lord, and we are empowered by His strength, as these scriptures confirm:

“But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk and not faint.” (Isaiah 40:31)

O fear the Lord, ye his saints: for there is no want to them that fear Him. (Psalm 34:9).

The angel of the Lord encampeth round about them that fear him, and delivereth them. (Psalm 34:7)

I will call upon the Lord, who is worthy to be praised: so shall I be saved from my enemies. (Psalm 18:3)

I will praise thee with my whole heart: before the gods will I sing praise unto thee. I will worship toward thy holy temple, and praise thy name for thy lovingkindness and for thy truth: for thou has magnified thy word above all thy name. In the day when I cried thou answeredst me, and strengthenedest me with strength in my soul. (Ps. 138: 1-3).

Why art thou cast down, O my soul? And why art thou disquieted in me? Hope thou in God: for I shall praise Him for the help of His countenance. (Psalm 42:5).