

My Grace is Enough For You

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[0 : 00] If you have your Bible and you want to turn to it, we're going to be in 2 Corinthians chapter 12. And some of you may be relieved that I'm not going to read verses 1 through 40.

They don't exist, but verses 1 through 10 do exist. And listen to God's Word.

I must go on boasting. This is the Apostle Paul writing. Though there is nothing to be gained by it, I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. I know a man in Christ who 14 years ago was called up to the third heaven.

Whether in the body or out of the body, I do not know. God knows. And I know that this man was called up into paradise. Whether in the body or out of the body, I do not know. God knows.

And he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter. On behalf of this man, I will boast. But on my own behalf, I will not boast, except in my weaknesses.

[1 : 05] Though if I should wish to boast, I would not be a fool, for I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me and hears from me.

So to keep me from becoming conceited, because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given to me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited.

Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness, in your weakness.

Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities.

For when I am weak, then I am strong. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Lord Jesus, meet us this morning as we look at your word.

[2 : 18] Holy Spirit, be here. Teach us. Draw our hearts to listen to you. And be changed to look more like the Lord Jesus. We pray in his name.

Amen. Please be seated. Good morning, New City. Good morning. Good morning.

It's a real pleasure to be here with you. My first time at New City, I think it was 1970 on 3rd Street at the Sunday School.

And a very interesting time in the life of the church. We would often, I was in a band that was playing the music and the singing.

And sometime, Jim Ward was leading the band. And sometimes when we would drive up to the place where the Sunday School was held on 3rd Street, the pastor would say, would you write a song about this?

[3 : 20] And you would see Jim with a piece of paper go out on the top of the car writing a song. And then we would play it and teach people how to sing it. So some things have changed.

It was a great time. I have a long history with New City. I worked for the church one summer when we were at the Southside Y. My first wife, who went to be with the Lord, her memorial service was here at New City.

And a year or so later, I borrowed one of the widows in the congregation. And she became my wife. Some of you remember Jenny.

She was always in the choir. Loved the singing. And we've been married now 23 years. So God has been good to us. And he uses the hardships, the insults, the calamities in our lives to draw us closer to himself.

And to show his work to the world. At the beginning of each year, we often talk about New Year's resolutions or reforming our lives.

[4 : 38] Often as followers of Christ, we do that. We think about reading our Bible more. We think of getting up 30 minutes earlier to pray before the sun gets up.

Or many other ways to grow closer to our Savior. But realistically, how long do those resolutions last? Maybe for a few of you, they last the whole year, but not for many of us.

If you are still keeping those commitments that you made in January. And I have to confess, I've stopped making those commitments in January.

If you made those, if you are still carrying them out, doing them in your life, you're unusual. It might be we are taking the wrong approach to treating God, the gospel spirituality, as though it was a gymnasium.

And there are some like things in there, the scripture tells us. But basically, it's not about our getting strong. It's about us seeing our weakness.

[5 : 48] And God showing his strength despite our weaknesses. I like to use the phrase, serving from weakness.

What that means is that we confess. We don't hide or at the same time, we don't flaunt our weaknesses. But we see in our problems and failures, God's power to love coming from him and others to show them the Lord Jesus.

It's from him, not from us. Jenny and I have been in New Mexico now for almost five years.

We were overseas for the first 18 years of our marriage. And then the mission that we work for, Surge Global, has been growing.

And we were asked to come and help train young leaders. And then I got an assignment, which you heard about, about overseeing work in Latin America and South Asia.

[6 : 55] And we know, I know that I am weak. New Mexico is an interesting place. I don't know if you've ever been there. It's essentially two-thirds desert.

It's not the desert like you see in movies with great big dunes, though there is one part like that. But it's just dry and scrub brush and juniper scrub.

And it's dry. And one of the things that is a feature of the landscape in New Mexico is there are these cacti. I don't know how many different types of cacti that are there.

But there's one that has these little tiny spines on them. And they're hard to see because they're just barely as big, as thick as a hare.

If you put one on your finger, you can see it. But they're hard to see. And sometimes if you're walking in a neighborhood and you step off the sidewalk or if you hike up in the hills, you'll feel this little pinch.

[8 : 00] And one of those tiny spines has gone either into your sock or up your pants, into your leg. And you're not going to see that thing for a while.

You will feel it. But it is there. And one of three things will happen with it. The first is it may fester up, get pussy, erupt, and then you clean it up with antibiotics and soap and water, and then you're over it.

Another thing that happens is it starts making its way deeper into your skin. And you have to have it cut out.

Or it will start making its way deeper into your skin. And then, glory to God, your body will eat it. And it will disappear. But that takes about four months.

I got one in February. And I'd made it almost four and a half years into Mexico without getting one of those things. But it got me in February. And it would bother me.

[9 : 10] And then quiet down, get a little red, quiet down, and praise the Lord. I think my body ate it. I don't know. But I don't feel it anymore.

You know, the Lord allows thorns to come into our lives. And he does it in a good way for his glory in our lives that he might be working in us to show the power of Christ.

We all have troubles. You know, the verse here calls this a thorn in the flesh. I was listening to a preacher this week who said that if you take that word thorn, the Apostle Paul is not talking about one of those little, thin, tiny New Mexico thorns.

It's the same word that's used in the Old Testament translation of the Bible in Greek. Same word that's used for a tent stake. It's something more significant than one of those tiny little things.

And you can't ignore it. And God allows those things, sends those things into our lives to show us his power, to teach us how to love because we love him, not because we are going to get the praise of people.

[10 : 34] That's one of our biggest struggles. But those things are good for us. You might think of people who are going into ministry that God would give them an easy life.

And that's not true. Yeah, no, it's not true. The one thing is he knows our hearts. So if he just kind of lets us go and everything is pretty easy, we start getting proud, taking credit for what he is doing. And in his generosity and kindness, he sends us thorns to expose our need. I want to tell you about a man.

I think I've talked about him in New City before. His name was William Henry Shepard. And he became a missionary to the Belgian Congo back in the 1800s.

And he was the first Presbyterian to go to that colony of Belgium way before there were airplanes.

[11 : 41] You had to go on a boat. It took you a long time to get there. And it was not exactly a safe place for Americans. William Henry Shepard was the first Presbyterian missionary to go there.

And he was African American. He was from Baltimore, Maryland. Grew up the son of a barber. Went to college. I think he went to Tuscaloosa Theological Institute.

And became a Presbyterian preacher, ordained a man. And then he sensed that God was calling him to go to Congo to take the gospel to that land that was so dark and unknown.

And the Presbytery, where he was in Alabama, approved him to go to the Congo. But as is not unusual in that day, we all know about the effects of racism in our country.

They said, okay, you can go. But as a black man, you can't go without a white man going with you. Now, what do you think William did?

[12 : 54] Well, he kept preaching. He kept visiting. He didn't give up. He didn't complain. And after 10 years, they found another man from Alabama, from Selma, named Samuel Lapsley.

And sent them both to go together. Now, Samuel Lapsley and William Shepard, even though the places they lived in the U.S. had struggles with racism, they were like brothers.

They slept in the same tent. There were no houses there. You had to carry your tents with you.

They used each other's clothes. They preached together. And God really blessed the relationship.

But then after a year, Samuel Lapsley got malaria and died. And so William was there by himself. Not by himself, but with all the tribal peoples around him.

And God used him mightily there. There's a biography written about him by a woman with an interesting name. Her name is Pagan Kennedy.

[14 : 05] And she's not a Christian. She's not real favorable to Christians. But she does a good job telling how God used William Lapsley. Not William Lapsley, but William Shepard.

And in the midst of that, if you have ever read about the Belgian Congo, it was a land where most atrocities, they claimed that the Belgian Congo, the king of Belgium, used it as his own little fiefdom. It's about the size of the continental U.S. With lots of resources, gold and rubber, they can be harvested. And they used different animosities between the different tribes to kill off people, to make them obey them.

And William Shepard exposed that to the world and showed how awful, you could call it genocide. It wasn't genocide in the sense of wiping out everyone from one group.

But genocide in the close to 10 million people died in the years that the king of Belgium was extracting precious resources from that area.

[15 : 19] William Henry Shepard, he didn't give up. When troubles came, when he got malaria, when his friend Samuel Lapsley died, they kept on and God kept using him.

And God says, my grace is enough for you. Now, Paul is speaking here. If you read the first six verses, they're kind of funny.

You know, Paul's talking about revelations, being taken into the third heaven. And it's kind of controversial what those things mean. If you look and read about it, you know, there's some interesting things proposed.

But essentially, no one knew what the thorn was that Paul gave to God. But Paul says, I was given a thorn to prevent me from becoming presumptuous because of the wonderful things that God was doing.

The revelations, using Paul to win many people to Christ. And a thorn that was stuck in my body was a message of Satan to torment me.

[16 : 34] I think, you know, now this is something you wonder, how can you say it was a gift from God, and yet something that Satan was using to torment me?

We often, you know, we're not consistent in the way we use language. And if someone is sick or afflicted or has a car accident and is hurt, it's right for us to sympathize with them.

It's also right to say, Satan will try to use that hard circumstance to turn me against the Lord, to bring complaints and anger out that we may be harboring towards the way God is managing our lives.

But God is so powerful that he takes even those hard things and he uses them to make us more like his son Jesus.

And instead of listening to the devil and being complaining and mean around other people just because we have pain, if we keep going to Christ, then he uses it as a wonderful thing to show us who Jesus is and to minister in places like Bayberry, downtown Chattanooga, wherever you go.

[18 : 03] He wants to use those things as a way for you to show the light of Christ to people around you. When we are broken, when we are sick, God has a plan for us.

He's not sidelined you, but he's given you a specific different ministry with whatever your thorn is that shows the light of Christ to people around you.

Probably no one here is a fan of pain. Some of you probably have chronic pain. And I hadn't thought a lot about chronic pain, even though I've known people that have had it until the last couple of years.

And the Lord had planned in my life, it's time for you to learn something about this kind of pain. But I had a knee replacement at the end of last year.

I have nerve kind of things going on in the back and neck. And what the Lord says, I think, to me is, these are my gifts to you to show you your weakness.

[19 : 22] These earthly bodies are not going to last forever. I may be preparing you to come to be with me. Of course, all of life is that preparation.

And he wants to use whatever our aches and pains are to draw us to himself. It could be vision problems. It could be epilepsy.

It could be enemies or even demonic attacks. But it doesn't matter. God can use those things and wants to use them. His plan is to use them for our good and his glory.

Even if it's something Satan is trying to use to beat you down, God says, son and daughter, you are mine. Come to me.

This is a calling. Come to me. What our Savior sends for our good, he's going to use for our good, even though the enemy tries to tempt us about those things.

[20 : 26] And in Paul's life, he says specifically that this thorn or tent stake had a purpose.

What does Paul say? Paul tells us that the thorn came to him so that he would not be conceited because of the things that God showed him.

It was protection against arrogance and spiritual pride. Now, all of us seem to have pride gets expressed in different ways in each of our lives and hearts.

And it may be we're trying to be a big person, get our name on the radio or the TV or on a billboard, whatever.

But it is there creeping around. Sometimes pride expresses itself by us wanting to be, well, tearing ourselves down.

[21 : 31] And it's still the same thing, but just from the opposite direction. You remember Jacob, the story of Jacob. Remember, Jacob was one of the sons of Isaac and Rebekah.

And he deceived his brother with his mother's help and stole the main part of the inheritance.

In the Old Testament, the firstborn son got two-thirds of the property of the father. And Isaac was a fairly wealthy man with lots of land and animals.

And Jacob tricked his brother into giving away his birthright, which was to that two-thirds of the property of the father. And of the blessing, which meant that his father would pray over him and pray that God would bless him, give him many children, much land, and keep him in this life in a very good way.

Well, if you remember the story of Jacob, Jacob tricked his brother out of that inheritance and then went off to a strange land.

[22 : 43] And then after 21 years, decided to come back, that God was calling him back. Jacob was quite a fellow. He left home because his brother was wanting to kill him for taking away his birthright.

And then he had to leave his uncle, Lot, because his uncle, Lot, was trying to kill him because he thought he had stolen all his animals or most of his animals. So he was constantly running away. Well, God used even that part of Jacob and his life to really turn him and use him for God's glory. So if you remember in Genesis 32, you can read this. The same night he arose, this is when Jacob was coming back.

He had been given a report that his brother Esau was coming with an army of men to meet him. And Jacob was afraid his brother was going to kill him and probably with good reason.

[23 : 50] The same night he arose and took his two wives, his two female servants, and his 11 children and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream and everything else that he had, with everything else that he had.

And Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the breaking of day. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched his hip socket, and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him.

Now just think about it. You're going back to face your brother, whom you've cheated out of most of the inheritance of your father. You're trying to plan your strategy.

If he actually attacks us, how are we going to fight him and win? And the night before you meet him, God comes and wrestles with you and pulls your hip out of socket so you can't even hardly walk. What great preparation for battle. And actually it was because it was going to be God's battle, not Jacob's. And then the man said to him, let me go, for the day has broken.

[25 : 02] But Jacob said, I will not let you go unless you bless me. And he said to him, what is your name? And he said, Jacob. Then he said, your name shall no longer be called Jacob, which meant usurper or deceiver.

You're going to be called Israel. You're going to be called Prince of God. And then he blessed him and sent him on his way with his hip out of socket.

And God took care of Jacob. You remember the rest of the story? His brother, even though he came with 400 armed men, he embraced his brother. They made up.

And it seems like they had at least a semblance of a good relationship after that. He pleaded in verse 8, it says, three times I beg the Lord to take it away from me.

And God's, oh, this is referring to Paul. Three times I beg the Lord to take it away from me. He pleaded with God three times. It means he asked, and the word there means seriously, with a lot of emotion.

[26 : 20] He didn't say, Lord, please take this thing away from me. He said, Lord, please deliver me from this thing. I can't handle it. And what God said was, no, my son.

You have to trust in my wisdom. Now, what do we do when we have a problem? Should we just give up and not ask God to take it away or to cure an illness? No.

Because Scripture commands us to pray. Tells us if those who are sick should call the elders and have them pray for them. And we should pray for each other through problems.

But we don't control the answer. We just control the asking. And it's being obedient to God to pray and to pray without ceasing and to keep asking and to bother him like the woman bothered the judge in the New Testament until he just kind of gave up and got tired and said, okay, I'll give her what she wants.

He calls us to pray constantly. But he doesn't tell you what the answer is going to be. I remember when my first wife was diagnosed with cancer.

[27 : 35] We prayed. We had people around the world praying for her. People at New City prayed for her. Cancer is a devastating disease. And what was God's answer?

Was he being unfaithful? When he said, no. It's time for my daughter to come home. And that may be true for us in many things we pray for.

But God still says, come to me. Call out to me. Come ask for my help, my cure.

Ask me to give you your health. But sometimes the answer is no. And we don't control that. We have to bow the head before God and let him show us how he's going to use even a terrible thing like sickness and death as a way to get glory for his son Jesus.

My grace is enough for you. Well, what is grace? Well, we know that some people say grace is unmerited favor.

[28 : 54] You get definitions. I forget what. This is an acrostic for grace. Each letter means something different. Grace. But grace essentially just means God's mercy for those who are

undeserving.

And that's us. That's us. We are sinners who need a Savior. Well, now, there's ways that you can misunderstand this command of God to pray in everything, to keep praying without ceasing, that my grace is sufficient for you.

How do we deal with prayer? I thought of five ways that we sometimes misunderstand what God is doing in saying my grace is sufficient for you.

One problem is I say, well, my faith is weak. So when I pray, God really doesn't answer me because of my faith.

It's just not enough. If I could live for him and have more faith, then he would answer my prayers.

That's a lie.

[30 : 07] You may need to live for him more than you are now. You may need to trust him more. But it's not the faith that changes God's mind or causes him to come and help us in our weakness.

It's the object of the faith, the power of the Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit and God the Father. It's the object of our faith that makes a difference.

Not how deeply we feel it. Not how big our faith is. Even faith the size of a mustard seed. And you can say to a mountain, go jump in the sea and it will.

God doesn't answer my prayers. So why should I keep asking? I obviously don't know what I'm doing.

Well, that would be kind of like if you think of yourself, if God gave you everything that you asked for, some of it would not be good for you in the long run because he knows what it's going to be like.

[31 : 11] Just think of an example of there are many children here at New City and some of your children have left home. If when your child was two years old, and let's just call a child Lydia.

She was my youngest daughter. So Lydia, it's time for us to go get an immunization for you. It's a shot. It might hurt a little bit. But would you like to have it?

Would you like to go with me? What do you think she would say? No! Kids two years old don't want immunizations.

Now I know there's some controversy about this immunization or that immunization, but by and large we use them to good effect. But a child would not willingly go have immunization if the parent were not with them, loving them, helping them along the way, even if they burst out in tears, because it's something that is going to be for their good.

It's going to give them a little hurt now to prevent them from a big hurt later on. And this is the way God answers our prayers, too.

[32 : 27] We are not omniscient. We don't see everything that's coming down the pike toward us or toward our church or for our family. But he brings what is good for us, even if we think it's going to hurt.

A third way we can think about prayer wrongly in this is that we might think, God must not be happy with me because he looks at my bad life and says, You think I'm going to answer your prayer?

Well, if that was true, no one would ever have a prayer answered. It's not because of our good life that he answers our prayers, that he heals us or he gives us what we need.

It's because he's a loving heavenly father. He causes the rain to come on the good and the evil.

And he answers that prayer when it's good for us and going to bless us in becoming more like his son Jesus.

Now, there's another hidden error. I think let's stop and go on. But we can do love and do good in God's name only because everything we do passes through the nail-scarred hands of his Savior, Jesus Christ.

[33 : 55] Because he died to save us, to cleanse even our works. Yes, our good works need to be cleansed. They are tainted. And to wash us from all evil.

Christ will present God everything we do as clean and pure. As someone has said, God is so powerful that he can use crooked instruments like us to do his good and just work.

His grace is sufficient for you. Now, just to wrap things up, let's think about this. In our educational system in America, one of the things that we are taught is that we need to be better, more competent, more efficient all the time.

And that needs to keep growing. The only thing that is acceptable, if you win, win, win, even though most, let's say, high school football teams, how many of them are going to be winning the state championship?

Well, one a year out of maybe 20,000 high schools. It's kind of a false thing. It's good to work hard. It's good to try hard. It's good to work to be stronger.

[35 : 23] And you work so that you can glorify God better. But the truth is, underneath all that, we're still weak, needy people.

And it's Jesus who is strong. With God's Spirit in us, He makes us what I would call weak, strong. And you are not spiritually strong unless you can see how really weak you are, how much you need Jesus every moment of every day.

Only His grace is sufficient. It's better for us to be weak, strong, because we need to depend upon Him.

Every day, we struggle with the vestiges of the old man in our hearts. Whether you live in the U.S. or Spain or Uganda or Jamaica, wherever it might be, we have, despite our language we speak or our skin color, we have that same issue of a heart that tends to drift away from a loving God.

[36 : 37] But Jesus' grace is sufficient. He loves us. He calls us back. He helps us even when we have bad spiritual disciplines.

And He helps us also even when we have good spiritual disciplines. It all comes from Him. Jesus is sufficient for us.

The Holy Spirit is big enough to love us and care for us. The grace of God the Father is enough for us. Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, we come before You now. We thank You that our lives and our ministry is not dependent upon us.

Yes, we want to be totally involved. We want to give all of our energy to the things You're calling us to as schoolteachers or whatever our work is in the church, in the city.

[37 : 38] If we clean up in certain places, we clean up for the glory of God. And we just thank You that that privilege comes to us because the Lord Jesus, that's all of our work, all of our prayers, all of our lives, pass through His nail-scarred hands as they come to the Father for the glory of Jesus.

We pray in His name. Amen.