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Sermon

His Grace is Sufficient **2 Corinthians 12:2-10**

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The dominant theme through Paul's second epistle to the Corinthian Church is the defence of his apostleship. Others have come from Jerusalem and criticised Paul. They claimed he was a poor orator, he didn't charge for teaching them so he couldn't be very good – certainly not as good as they were - they charged more!

These were Judaizers who wanted to bring the Corinthians under the Jewish Law. They were intent on destroying Paul's authority. They accused him of double-mindedness in that he had changed his travel plans, of potential fraud over the collection for the Jerusalem Church, of being weak and unimpressive.

On the other hand, they made claims for themselves of bearing letters of commendation and where were Paul's? They had polished eloquence and deep knowledge, visions and revelations, healing miracles. They emphasised that they were true Jews and disciples of Jesus. All this was designed to impress the new Christians of Corinth and cause them to follow them rather than Paul.

So Paul needed to defend his ministry and authority. Earlier in the letter, he has answered various criticisms, now he turns to his weakness. They are boasting of their great exploits, so he reluctantly boasts too. We need to step back into the previous chapter to pick up the flow and it is surprising!

2 Corinthians 11:18-27 *Since many are boasting in the way the world does, I too will boast. ¹⁹ You gladly put up with fools since you are so wise! ²⁰ In fact, you even put up with anyone who enslaves you or exploits you or takes advantage of you or pushes himself forward or slaps you in the face. ²¹ To my shame I admit that we were too weak for that! What anyone else dares to boast about--I am speaking as a fool-- I also dare to boast about. ²² Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they Abraham's descendants? So am I. ²³ Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) I am more. I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. ²⁴ Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. ²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, ²⁶ I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. ²⁷ I have laboured and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked.*

So Paul had suffered this catalogue of battering and persecution for the infant church! Would you do that? Would you carry on after just one of those things? How about being beaten with 39 strokes of the lash? Still going to preach at the synagogue? And again? A third time? Oh, there was a fourth – and a fifth. Then the Romans had a go with their rods on three occasions and they were not limited to 39 strokes as the Torah restricted the Jews. They were actually forbidden to beat a Roman citizen, but sometimes the rule of law breaks down in heated circumstances.

He was stoned to death outside Lystra ...

Acts 14:19-22 Then some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and won the crowd over. They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead. ²⁰ But after the disciples had gathered round him, he got up and went back into the city. The next day he and Barnabas left for Derbe. ²¹ They preached the good news in that city and won a large number of disciples. Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, ²² strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God," they said.

We all know of Paul's sea voyage to Rome and being shipwrecked on Malta. But he was not referring to that voyage - it would not happen for another three years. He records that he had been shipwrecked three times in his journeys for the church.

Paul gave himself gladly to plant and tend the Gentile churches. It cost him greatly. What does it cost us to be part of the church – to extend the church?

Do you hear Paul's tender concern for the church? Sometimes I hear Christians speak harshly of Paul. They think he was unkind, judgemental, hard-hearted but listen to the tenderness with which he continues:

²⁸ Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. ²⁹ Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn? ³⁰ If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.

Or this comment from his first letter to the Thessalonians:

As apostles of Christ we could have been a burden to you, but we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children. We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us.¹

This was a man whose heart was full for Christians but who was prepared to defend the good deposit that he had planted in those churches lest it be corrupted and they be led astray.

If you are offended by Paul, I ask you to reconsider. Maybe you are shooting the messenger; maybe you don't understand the dangers he sees that would destroy the Church. This is the one who penned the highest description of selfless love, those words of 1 Corinthians 13 are not the words of a bigot or a hard-hearted man.

Yes, Paul suffered greatly for the church. He had been warned of it at his calling. Jesus said to Ananias, "This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."²

Paul's enemies painted him as weak and unimpressive but this is the stuff of a Bear Grylls adventure! Paul is describing a seriously tough life.

With more protesting that he doesn't want to boast but is being forced into it, he turns to a positive experience in chapter 12. They boast of revelations and visions – he has had his too. He is reticent about it, saying he knows a man who was caught up into the third heaven. but it is obvious that he writes of himself. By verse 7, he acknowledges he has had "these surpassingly great revelations."

¹ 1 Thessalonians 2:7-8

² Acts 9:15-16

He says he was caught up into the third heaven to the paradise of God. The Jews called the atmosphere “the first heaven”; space – “the second heaven” and the abode of God, “the third heaven.” This is the paradise promised to the criminal dying next to him at Calvary. Paul visited paradise although he stresses he doesn’t know whether he was in the body or not.

We may wonder about the circumstances of this event. He tells us it was 14 years before. That puts it in 42AD when he was based in Tarsus after becoming a Christian. We know nothing more about circumstances of the event. However, he says he heard things which cannot be expressed and indeed leave has not been given for a man to speak them. These were divine secrets. Paul, in fact, minimised the event. It was not a basis for doctrine or other people’s faith. He does not use it in his preaching. In effect, if they want to play the dramatic event card, he can trump them - now let’s move on!

The important lesson from this event is the suffering which he is given lest he became conceited from the experience.

There is much debate about the nature of the “thorn in the flesh.” A favoured explanation is that it was an eye problem based on his comment to Galatians that he had an illness when he first visited them and they would gladly have given him their eyes. However, that is an assumption and not the only explanation.

Another which is worth considering is that he refers to persecution. This is not a new idea, it is found in the writings of the Fourth Century Fathers. Paul refers to something which torments him – it is a messenger or angel of Satan. He calls it a thorn in the flesh. Patently, “thorn in the flesh” is idiomatic, like our saying “a pain in the neck.” But what did he mean? Paul was steeped in the Scriptures, so does such an expression occur there? It does actually three times:

Numbers 33:55 “But if you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land, those you allow to remain will become barbs in your eyes and thorns in your sides. They will give you trouble in the land where you will live.

Joshua 23:13 ... these nations ... will become snares and traps for you, whips on your backs and thorns in your eyes...

Ezekiel 28:24 “No longer will the people of Israel have malicious neighbours who are painful briars and sharp thorns.”

In each case, malicious or persecuting neighbouring people are referred to as thorns afflicting the Israelites; in one of those passages they are “thorns in the side.”

By the way if he was thinking of an eye problem he could have quoted the alarming “thorn in your eye” verse! Remember he was stoned at Lystra and left for dead. That was in the Galatian region. The next day Paul walked to Derbe, another city of Galatia, and began preaching to them. I’m sure he had runny, puffy eyes, along with multiple cuts and bruises, but they were not the result of some disease. They were the result of having been stoned. Incidentally, the NIV refers in Galatians to his ailment but the Greek is actually “infirmity of the body.” The suggestion of an eye disease has a weak basis.

What is the context back in 2 Corinthians? It is suffering from persecution: beating, whipping, imprisonment, from gentiles, Jews and false brothers. There is no suggestion of sickness – there is plenty of human opposition.

I believe the better explanation is that Paul refers to persecution as the thorn in the flesh. When he asked for it to be removed, God said to him, “My grace is sufficient for you for my power is made perfect in weakness.”³

This is the answer to our fear about suffering. His grace is sufficient for me. Listen to the grand old preacher, Charles Spurgeon affirming this:

³ 2 Cor 12:9

“The grace of Lord Jesus Christ is sufficient to uphold you, sufficient to strengthen you, sufficient to comfort you, sufficient to make your trouble useful to you, sufficient to enable you to triumph over it, sufficient to bring you out of it, sufficient to bring you home to heaven. ... Here let me press upon you the pleasing duty of taking home the promise personally at this moment, for no believer here need be under any fear, since for him also at this very instant, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ is sufficient.”⁴

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⁴ C.H. Spurgeon, “Strengthening Words from the Saviour’s Lips,” 2/4/1876; quoted in “The NIV Application Commentary on 2 Corinthians,” Hafemann S.J., Zondervan, 2000, page 481-2.