

Sufficient Grace for Humbling Circumstances, Part 2

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 12:7-10

Code: 90-345

As we come back to the Word of God, we really are finishing up what we started last Lord's day. I didn't want to divide this message in to two because I knew this would be a weekend when a lot of folks would be gone, but that's kind of the way it worked out and I can't always overcome the spiritual moment and make changes on the fly. So we'll go back to the passage before us that we started last Sunday night.

If you will, open your Bible to 2 Corinthians chapter 12...2 Corinthians chapter 12. Here is a portion of Scripture that is somewhat familiar to most students of the Bible, although it is a controversial one and I think needlessly so. And we're attempting to make it simple and clear and straightforward in its meaning. Let me read it to you, 2 Corinthians 12 verses 7 through 10. "And because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations for this reason to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, to keep me from exalting myself. Concerning this I entreated the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And He has said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.' Most gladly therefore I would rather boast about my weaknesses that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties for Christ's sake, for when I am weak then I am strong."

Now as we began our discussion last week, I mentioned to you something we all understand, I think, if we've lived very long in this world and it is that life is painful, life is filled with that kind of list that you find in verse 10, weaknesses, insults, distresses, persecutions and difficulties. I suppose at the broadest point we could divide those troubles that come to us into two categories. There are those things that come upon us because of our sin and there are those things that come upon us to keep us from sin. And in the broadest sense, that is true. There are troubles that come to us because God is disciplining us. Hebrews chapter 12 says that everyone who is truly a child of God will be disciplined by God for the purpose of righteousness. What father...says the writer of Hebrews...is there who is a good and faithful father who doesn't discipline his own children? If the Lord loves us, He will scourge us. So, there are things that come into our lives, difficulties and troubles that fall into the words used there in verse 10, that come directly from the hand of God as discipline for our sins. But that is not what this passage is talking about because if you go back to verse 10 you will see that the weaknesses and the insults and the distresses and the persecutions and the difficulties that Paul is talking about in his life have come not because of his sin, but for Christ's sake. And the phrase "for Christ's sake" refers to each of those five categories. They are distresses for Christ's sake, or

tribulations, or troubles, persecutions, difficulties, insults and weaknesses. He is talking about a category of trouble that comes into our lives that is apart from sin. It is not to say that we are without sin, it is to say this trouble comes not to discipline us for sin, but quite the opposite of that, this is the trouble that comes to keep us from sin. This is the trouble that comes for the sake of Christ. That is, in the living out of Christian testimony, doing what God wants us to do, being obedient, being godly, God still brings trouble into our lives even when we are not being disciplined to lead us further into spiritual strength, further into spiritual usefulness.

It is an over-simplification to say that if somebody has trouble in their life, it is because of sin. That's, of course, what is the age-old assumption. That view of evil goes all the way back to the book of Job, doesn't it? Job had trouble in his life and his friends came along and said, "Well that's an easy problem to solve, you're sinful. All of this has come upon you because you are sinful." And Job's response was, "I've examined my own heart, I've done an inventory of my own life, I'm not perfect but there is no sin that I'm engaged in that I will not release, that I do not want God to remove. I am confessing, repenting, if you will, it is not a sin issue." And they would not accept that and they relentlessly pounded home their own theological viewpoint, that all suffering is a result of sin. This comes up again in the New Testament when Jesus heals a blind man, recorded in John 9, and when the question is asked, "Why is this man born blind?" The answer comes, "Because of some sin committed by his parents." And Jesus says, "The parents have not sinned and brought this about, neither has this man sinned and brought it about, it is rather for the glory of God." There is suffering in this life for divine purposes apart from chastening and suffering.

And sometimes this is the hardest to understand, the most difficult to understand. To be suffering, to be going through difficulties and to do an inventory in your life and to be able to say to yourself, "Look, I don't really know anything in my life that's a glaring iniquity that I'm embracing and cultivating. I can't find any such thing," and have people accusing you and saying, "Well there's got to be something somewhere." That's a very hard thing to endure. I remember having that experience with a quote/unquote Christian psychologist who said to me, "What are you covering up in your life?" And I said, "I don't know, I'm not sure I'm covering up anything." To which he replied, "Oh, it's that deep, is it? It's that deep that you're not only covering it, but you aren't even aware that you're covering it." And I went through whatever process I was supposed to be in his quasi-Christian therapy to uncover things that I couldn't find and nobody else could find, as if I were living some secret life of shame.

I later on kind of figured out that maybe, just maybe, he thinks everyone is like him. I don't know, but it's pretty easy to generalize off of your own experiences. Paul says back at the beginning of this letter, chapter 1 and verse 12, "Our proud confidence is this..." and this is a humble boasting, "the testimony of our conscience that in holiness and godly sincerity, not in fleshly wisdom but in the grace of God, we have conducted ourselves in the world and especially toward you." He says you can accuse me of whatever you want to accuse me of, and they were relentless, we pointed that out last time. You can accuse me of whatever you want such as in chapter 4 verse 2, accusing him of having

a secret life of shame, walking in deceit and adulterating the Word of God, you can accuse me of whatever you want, I will respond by saying, "My conscience does not accuse me." The testimony of my conscience is that in holiness and godly sincerity, I have conducted myself in the world and especially toward you. This is not a product of my own fleshly wisdom, my own insight. This is the work of the grace of God.

So here is Paul saying you may accuse me, my own conscience does not. And my own conscience is a God-given device to accuse me if I need accusing, and my conscience is fully informed by a true understanding of the law of God, the law of God written in the heart of Romans 2, and that law of God written in the heart of the Apostle Paul had been enriched and embellished by a full understanding of New Testament revelation. And so he had a conscience that was fully informed of the truth of God and categorically understood what it was to be holy and godly, and he says, "As I look at my own conscience, I can simply tell you this, I am not being accused. I have conducted myself in a godly way before you and my conscience gives testimony to the integrity of that claim."

Still and this is perhaps more difficult to deal with, the man's life was filled with trouble. Had he had his own little group of Job's friends, they probably would have dogged him all his life telling him, "You've got to be hiding something, Paul, you've got to be covering something. Get the layers peeled off. Maybe you've got repressed sins that are down deep so repressed that you've forgotten them. Maybe you so trained yourself that you are very adept at ignoring them." He would have been continually non-responsive to those kinds of accusations and gone back to the fact, "I have a fully informed conscience, I know the Word of God, my conscience is a device given by God to accuse me if I need to be accused of violating that, my conscience is clear," and yet, suffering upon suffering, upon suffering. And while some of his suffering came from outside the church, came from the Jews and the Gentiles who resented the gospel, much of his pain came from inside the church.

In fact, with that in mind, go to the eleventh chapter of 2 Corinthians and I remind you, in the eleventh chapter of 2 Corinthians, after having given a list of all that he suffered from the enemies of the gospel, all the labors, imprisonments, beatings, danger, 39 lashes from the Jews, beaten with rods, stoned, shipwrecked, all the danger from robbers and countrymen and Gentiles in the city and the wilderness, in the sea, among false brethren, labor and hardship, sleepless nights, hunger, thirst, without food, cold and exposure, all of this that he had to endure, much of it at the hands of the enemies of the cross, really beyond that, more painful than those external things is the daily pressure upon me of concern for all the churches.

I will tell you as a pastor, I fully understand that...fully understand that. I understand what it is to be hit from the outside and the outside, the enemies of the cross, can afflict some minor external wounds. Nothing to be compared with how you can be wounded in the house of your friends, in the place where you've invested your life, where you've labored in love and sacrifice on behalf of a people who turn on you. That's what had happened to him in the Corinthian church, they turned on him. It was

tough enough just caring for the church. Verse 29, "Who is weak without my being weak?" He felt their pain and when they were weak and defective and rebellious and recalcitrant and unresponsive and irresponsible and fleshy and divisive and sinful, he felt the pain. Who is led into sin without my intense concern? He knew what it was to be wounded in the house of his friends.

One of the things that happens every year when pastors come from all over the world to the Shepherds Conference by the thousands, they come here to lick their wounds. And they are not wounds inflicted upon them by non-believers, they are wounds inflicted upon them by the people in their own churches, the people in whose lives they have made the greatest investment. The closer you are to people, the more you love them, the more you expose yourself to them, the greater their ability to inflict pain on you. And if you can't identify with that personally and experientially because you're not a pastor, then identify it as a reality in your relationship with family members, or with a close circle of friends. You know in that circle of family and friends is the greatest potential to break your heart...even in your own marriage, your relationship with your husband, your children, extended family, close friends. When you give your love to someone, when you give your heart to someone, when you give your life to someone, they have power to devastate you. When a faithful man puts his whole life unselfishly, sacrificially, spiritually on the line for the sake of virtual strangers to bring them the gospel and lead them to the knowledge of the Christian faith and they turn on him, it is THE most crushing experience...if...if you do not understand that even in that experience God has a purpose...God has a purpose.

Now this is exactly where we find Paul when he wrote 2 Corinthians. He is in deep pain. Talked about his suffering in chapter 1, 4, 6, 10, 11, 12 and even refers to it in 13, it is the constant recurring theme in this book. And he was godly.

Go down to the fourteenth verse for a moment in chapter 12, before we back up, the fourteenth verse in chapter 12. Here for the third time he said, "I'm ready to come to you, I will not be a burden to you, I do not seek what is yours but you. I don't want anything from you. I'm not selfish, I'm not in it for the money. I'm not in it for anything personal, I don't want anything you have. I want you and I want you for God and for the Kingdom." And the illustration, "For children are not responsible to save up for their parents but parents for their children." I am to you a spiritual parent. I am doing what I'm doing because I love you and I care about your spiritual life and growth and development. So, in verse 15, "I will most gladly spend and be expended for your souls." That's his attitude. It's a giveaway of his whole life. "If I love you the more...verse 15...am I to be loved the less?" Is this what I get in return, for this love and this sacrifice and this commitment?

Do you think he sarcastically indicates in verse 16, "That I'm some kind of sneaky crafty fellow that took advantage of you by deception?" "Certainly...verse 17...I have not taken advantage of you through any of those whom I have sent to you, have I? I urged Titus to go, sent the brother with him. Titus didn't take any advantage of you, did he? Did we not conduct ourselves in the same spirit and

walk in the same steps?”

They were accusing Paul not only of taking advantage of them, but false teachers who had infiltrated the Corinthian church and the church was buying into their lies. But they were also accusing even the ones that Paul sent to help him in the work there of doing what they did for personal advantage. Paul says, “None of us did that, we did what we did for your sakes, we did what we did because we love you. Is it going to be our lot that the more we love you the less you love us?”

Paul was in deep pain over this disaffection of this church. His life was right. He was godly. There wasn't any sin that he knew of which God needed to discipline. This was not remediation, this was not punishment, this was not discipline. He needed perspective and that perspective comes in the passage that I read to you. And it is a perspective for all of us who suffer in this life at the severest level which always will be inflicted on us by the people who have the most power to hurt us and that is the people whom we love the most. And it answers the question of what in the world is God doing in my life? I have looked at my life, I don't see things in my life that are wrong. Why am I suffering like this in my marriage? Why am I suffering like this in my family? Why am I suffering like this in my extended family or with the friends that I counted on? Why am I suffering like this in my Bible study, my fellowship group, my ministry? What's going on here?

If I walk in obedience and if I walk in godly sincerity and holiness before the Lord and if I have a clear conscience, shouldn't there be smooth sailing through life? Shouldn't all the negatives of life disappear because I'm not being chastened anymore? No...no, not at all. And I take you back to the fact that there are these two kinds of suffering and God has a purpose in the second. Listen to the words of Peter, 1 Peter 2:20, “What credit is there if when you sin and are harshly treated you endure it with patience?” You get no credit for that, you're getting what you deserve. “But if when you do what is right and suffer for it, you patiently endure...this finds favor with God.” You don't get a reward for enduring punishment for sin. But you do find favor with God when you endure trouble that is not because of sin, when you do what is right and suffer for it and patiently endure it...this finds favor with God. That's 1 Peter 2:20. Here's 1 Peter 3:17, “It is better if God should will it so that you suffer for doing what is right rather than for doing what is wrong.” You're going to suffer. You're going to suffer for doing what is wrong. God disciplines His children. But it's much better to suffer for doing what is right, but you will suffer for doing what is right. You will suffer persecution. “All that will live godly in this present age will suffer persecution.” That's a promise Paul gave. “All that will live godly in this life will suffer persecution.” So the more godly you are, the more external hostility you will receive.

But we're not talking about that. There's another kind of suffering for righteousness sake that comes not from the outside, not from the enemies, but from the inside in the most intimate circles of our relationships. Nothing is as painful as betrayal. Nothing is as painful as disloyalty. Nothing is as painful as rejection, misrepresentation, unrequited love from those in whose lives we have made the most loving investment. It's a crushing experience and you have to have perspective.

Paul's in the middle of this severe pain...in the middle of it. He is being inflicted with what he calls, let's go back to verse 7 now and pick up the text and wrap up our discussion of it, he says, "There was given me from God who is the source providentially, there was given me a thorn in the flesh," not for some sin, not for some discipline, but there was nonetheless given him a thorn for the flesh. The word "thorn" I told you was the word for shaft, a sharpened beam of wood used like a stake to drive in the ground or a spear to thrust through someone with deadly force. It is a sharpened wooden shaft used to impale someone. He says this shaft is literally for the flesh, for the purpose of inflicting wounds on my flesh. What does Paul mean when he says "flesh"? Not talking about his physical body, he's always talking about his unredeemed humanness. That is to say, though he is a new creation, though he is a new man, though he has a new disposition, though Christ lives in him and the life that he lives he lives literally in the power of Christ, still that new life, that new man, that new creation is incarcerated in unredeemed humanness. And while all the longings and aspirations of the new man are just and holy and righteous, they are impeded and limited and conflicted with the longings of our humanness. He was human. And his flesh had the potential to do damage, the lust of the flesh, the desires of the flesh, as Paul refers to them. John speaks of the lust of the eyes, pride of life, those kinds of things that are part of being human. And we won't lose that until the redemption of our body and we enter into the glory of heaven.

So for the time being, in order to restrain our flesh, God brings along things that literally inflict massive wounds on our flesh. What was this, a thorn in the flesh? What is it? Well he tells you, "A messenger of Satan." Messenger is angelos, angelos is angel, satanic angel, a satanic angel is a demon. Paul did not have a demon. Paul was not demon possessed. Christians cannot be demon possessed. Demons cannot live in Christians, we are the temple of the Holy Spirit. We are the temple of God. We're indwelt by the Lord Jesus Christ. There is not one single occasion anywhere in the pages of Scripture where a believer was indwelt by a demon. Nor is there any reason to think that you need to go around casting demons out of Christians.

What is he talking about? He's talking about a messenger from Satan, a satanic angel, a demon, inflicting a profound wound on Paul in the realm of his humanness. It's amazing what commentators say this is. Here's what I've read. The thorn in the flesh is headaches, lust, ophthalmia(?) some eye illness, epilepsy, hysteria, hypochondria, gallstones, gout, rheumatism, sciatica, gastritis, leprosy, malaria, lice, deafness, dental infection, speech impediment, etc. Now none of that was achieved by a careful exegesis of the verse...obviously. And the list itself is self-destructive because if it could mean all of that, then it surely doesn't mean any of that. It's not unclear. It is absolutely crystal clear what he says it is. It is a satanic angel. It is a demon. If the demon isn't in Paul, where is this demon doing all this damage? It is that demon-inspired leader of the false teachers that I told you about so many times that had infiltrated the Corinthian church in an attempt to propagate lies and in order to achieve that they had to destroy the people's confidence in Paul and so they launched an all-out assault on Paul's character. They're tearing up the church...tearing it up.

God has allowed the false teachers to do terrible damage to that church in the same way that God allowed Satan to do terrible damage to the family of Job and the possessions of Job and the physical health of Job. God goes to amazing lengths to refine His people. And out of Job losing everything, and never knowing why, except that he knew it wasn't a discipline for sin. He lost it all, he never deviated in this trust. He said, "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him." And in the end when it was all said and done, Job says in Job 42:6, "I have heard of you with a hearing of mine ear." I had a certain second-hand knowledge of You, now my eye sees You and I repent in dust and ashes. It had a profound spiritual impact on Job. It broke his pride, it crushed him, it humbled him before God.

That was the point. And then God poured out blessing on that man. God uses Satan. Satan is God's servant. Never does anything apart from the sovereign purposes of God. And the purpose here is clearly indicated in verse 7. The thorn in the flesh, this satanic angel, this demon leading the assault on the church was sent to that church, notice, doesn't say to disrupt the church, it says to buffet me...to buffet me. He knew what that meant. That's a word that means to strike somebody in the face with a fist, same word used in 1 Corinthians 9:27. The Apostle Paul had written to the Corinthians there and he said, "I buffet my body to bring it into subjection, lest in preaching to others I myself become disqualified." I know, he says, that I have the potential to deviate from the truth. I know that I have the potential in the flesh to fail. I know that I have the potential to fall into sin and be disqualified from ministry, so I buffet my body. I strike blows against my otherwise sinful flesh to keep it in line. And if he does that, if he buffets his own body to keep it in place, then why would we not expect God to buffet him as well? Paul does what he can do to keep his flesh where it needs to be, and God does what only He can do to keep His flesh where it needs to be. And from God's viewpoint, the great temptation for Paul was to become...what?...proud. I mean, who wouldn't? If you were Paul, do you think you could be humble?

And so, that's exactly why God brought this into his life. Just as God says I'm going to allow the devil to sow tares among the wheat, as God said I'm going to allow the devil to do his damage in limitation to job, just as the Lord said to Peter Satan is going to take you and sift you like wheat, I have my purpose so God had a purpose for Paul. And so He has a purpose for us. And sometimes that purpose may involve even the forces of Satan.

Why? What is God trying to do? For what purpose?

Number one, this is where we were last time, God uses suffering to humble His children. He says it twice in verse 7, "To keep me from exalting myself, to keep me from exalting myself." Not a hard thing for Paul to understand. He had these personal visions of Christ, as many as half a dozen of them or so. He had a personal trip to heaven. He talks about it in the opening five verses of this chapter. He had much to be proud about. He reminds me of the potential, the preacher who finished his sermon and came down to the front. A lady came up to him and said, "That was a great sermon." To which he

replied, "Thank you, ma'am, my flesh told me the very same thing as soon as I finished."

There's always that possibility and that temptation, even when you're involved in the Kingdom of God to be self-commending. His flesh needed to be humbled because he had had so many unique extraordinary experiences.

Secondly now, God uses suffering not only to humble us, but God uses humbling to draw us to Himself. What is the effect of this? What does it produce? Verse 8, "Concerning this, I entreated the Lord three times that it might depart from me." I will tell you and you know this from your own experience, where is the first place you go when you get caught in this kind of pain? Where do you go? You go to God. I hope you're not looking for a therapist. I hope you're not looking for a prescription. I hope you're not looking for some way to somehow unscramble your omelet. God uses suffering to draw us to Himself. This is the absolute right response.

In the time of the greatest need, in the time of the deepest pain, time of the severest trial, Paul didn't go to Timothy, Paul didn't go to Titus, Paul went to God. He didn't call a committee meeting, he didn't say let's have a strategy sessions, let's get together, guys, I don't know what's going on, we've got to figure out a way to deal with this thing, we've got a messenger of Satan, you know, running rampant through the church at Corinth into which I've made such a massive investment, you guys have done it with me, you've been there, you know what's going on...we need to figure out a strategy to undo this thing. Paul did what he had to do, he went directly to God. It was beyond him. The delight of his life, shepherding the people of God, the joy of his service, seeing a church develop in that pagan place, when there's no technique and there's no human wisdom and there's no strategy to fix it, what do you do? What does he do? "Concerning this I begged the Lord." By the way, entreated is used frequently in the gospels, the word is entreated in the NAS, used frequently in the gospels to reference appeals from the sick who come to Jesus and beg Him to heal them.

I understand that. I understand that. You understand that. When your spouse abuses you and mistreats you, when your children do, when the circle of friends collapses around you, where do you go when you can't fix it? When there's no easy solution? Where do we go when we feel these things in ministry, betrayal, all of those kinds of things? This is the best possible thing for your prayer life. The more intimate the suffering, the more likely it is to drive you to God. Even in the physical realm, I think back...when I think about the most intense times of prayer in my life, and prayer for me is a state of consciousness in which my life is just open to God all the time, but the most intense times of prayer, you think back, involve times when the people the closest to me that I love the most were in a situation I couldn't do anything about. I remember when I was told that Patricia had a car accident and her neck was broken, C2 was explosion fracture and a C3 was fractured and I didn't know whether she was alive or dead for a number of hours, trying to get to her. There is no way to even describe the intensity of prayer that begins at that moment and never ceases till resolution comes. Finding my way eventually to the hospital, seeing her in that condition with a broken neck, realizing the potential,

terrible damage, quadriplegia, or worse, death, and there's nothing I can do...nothing that I can do to help the people who are helping her, I would only be in the way. Or when I went to the neurosurgeon at Cedars Sinai to be told that my son Mark had a brain tumor, launched into long term intensive prayer, pleading with God, entreating God. When trouble comes that has the potential to do great damage to relationships, to ministry, to the church. And yet it's a sad commentary on our lives that it takes those kinds of things to elevate the intensity of our prayer life, isn't it?

But no other time in Paul's life does he say, "I entreated the Lord three times." I went back on three separate occasions and I entreated the Lord. What was his plea? That it might depart from me. Lord...I'm sure he prayed the imprecatory Psalms...remember the imprecatory Psalms that David prayed over his enemies? Pretty simple, "God, please now kill my enemies." That's what he prayed. Kill them. I'm sure Paul prayed imprecatory Psalms, "Lord, God, kill those false teachers. How can You allow those false teachers to go into the church where Your name is named and Your gospel is preached and wreak this havoc?" On three separate occasions he prayed to the Lord, that's the only place he could go and this is one of the great benefits of suffering, especially that inexplicable suffering.

Notice Paul did not rebuke Satan. He didn't bind Satan. He didn't have a discussion with the demon. He didn't even confront the false teacher. He went to the only one who can deal with Satan and demons, he went to the Lord. His prayer was in faith. His prayer was persistent. His prayer was specific. "Lord, I want this to stop." And by the way, that verb "that it might depart from me," is usually used in the New Testament of persons, not things. It's not a disease. He's not saying, "I want this disease to depart from me." He's saying, "I want this pain, this inflicted suffering coming at the hands of this person to stop." He doesn't really blame the false teacher. He doesn't go to him. Doesn't blame Satan, doesn't start pronouncing things against Satan. He goes to God who controls everything...everything. Face the great trial knowing that God uses trials to humble him and learning that in the midst of these trials there is a great benefit in an increased commitment to prayer. The sweetest times of communion with God come in the most profound times of suffering.

He went to the only one he could go to, the one that we go to so reluctantly when we're not in desperation. So we say, "God, bring into my life whatever needs to come to humble me, bring into my life whatever needs to come to catapult me into a more intense prayer life."

Thirdly, God uses suffering to display His grace. God uses suffering to display His grace. Verse 9, here's His answer, "And He has said to me..." Has said is a perfect tense verb, means it is a standing answer put permanently in place. Or another way to say it is he kept getting the same answer every time he asked. "He has said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you.'" What a great statement. After three times, Paul was done, got the same answer all three times, good to be persistent, also good to know that this is the answer. God answered not by removing the trouble. God answered not by removing the pain. God answered not by removing the false teachers...not at that point. God

answered by increasing the grace. He gave relief not by removal of the problem. He gave relief by the sufficient strength to persevere through the humbling process.

What God wants out of you is more intimate fellowship. What God wants out of you is greater humility. And God will let you stay in the suffering, turn up the grace to whatever level He needs to, to put you through that crucible of suffering, to achieve that intimacy, and to achieve that humility. It was grace on display. And when you look back on that, sometimes you wonder how you can get through those times. You wonder how you survived those times. How did you ever make it? How did I ever get through that time? You look back and you say, "It was grace, it was abundant sustained grace. My faith never wavered. My trust in Christ as my Redeemer never wavered. My trust in God as a loving Father never wavered. And there I was about to lose everything that was precious to me, there I was about to lose everything in which I had made the greatest investment, the worst possible scenario was unfolding before my very eyes and I bore it all with profound grace and never wavered in my faith. Is that not a great thing to learn? That's where your assurance comes from. It comes from faith being tested. Peter says that, "When your faith is tested, the product is assurance that you have the real thing." Joshua 1:9, "Be strong and courageous, do not tremble or be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go."

Look at Lamentations 3, this is just a passage that came to mind today and it's...it's related, too wonderful, too rich not to look at. Lamentations 3:19. Lamentations is that, it's a lament, it's a sad time. God's judgment is going to fall on Israel. And the prophet Jeremiah pours out his heart. Just listen to this, starting in verse 19 of Lamentations 3. "Remember my affliction in my wandering, the wormwood and bitterness. Surely my soul remembers and is bowed down within me." This is great suffering for the prophet of God. People won't listen to him. People won't hear his message. People resent him. Eventually threw him in a pit. They're headed for judgment. They're headed for captivity. His heart is broken. He's known as the weeping prophet. He cries the very tears of God. So he says, "My soul remembers, is bowed down within me. This I recall to my mind. Therefore I have hope. What is it you recall that gives you hope? The Lord's lovingkindnesses." That's the Old Testament word for grace. "The Lord's grace indeed never ceases. His compassions never fail. They are new every morning, great is Thy faithfulness." Everything has gone as bad as bad can be from the standpoint of a faithful prophet. No one listening to his message, everyone rebelling and resenting him. Judgment coming. No one will listen.

What's he left with? A faithful God. Verse 24, "The Lord is my portion, says my soul, therefore I have hope in Him. The Lord is good to those who wait for Him, to the person who seeks Him. It is good that He waits silently for the salvation of the Lord." Just shut your mouth, go through the pain, go through the suffering, and wait for the deliverance that will come. "It is good for a man that he should bear the yoke in his youth. Let him sit alone and be silent, since he has laid it on him. Let him put his mouth in the dust. Perhaps there's hope. Let him give his cheek to the smiter, let him be filled with reproach for the Lord will not reject forever. For if He causes grief, then He will have compassion according to His

abundant lovingkindnesses.” That's God. That's God.

Jeremiah had confidence in the Lord's grace, *chesed*, the Old Testament term for grace. And when the pain turned up, God turned up the grace. God does not promise to remove the problems and the troubles, but He does promise to give sufficient grace. “My grace is *arke*(?), enough in the Greek, enough...enough.

It was Spurgeon in his inimitable way who told of an occasion when he was riding home one evening after a heavy-day's work and feeling very depressed. He thought of this verse. “My grace is sufficient for you.” And then he said he immediately compared himself to a little fish in the Thames River. Apprehensive, lest drinking so many pints of water in the river each day he might drink the Thames dry. And hearing Father Thames say, “Drink away, little fish, my stream is sufficient to you.” And then he thought of a little mouse in the granaries of Joseph in Egypt, afraid lest it might by daily consumption of the corn it needed exhaust the supplies and then starve to death. And when Joseph came along sensing his fear, he said to the little mouse, “Cheer up, little mouse, my granaries are sufficient for you.” Or again he thought of a man climbing to the top of Everest, reaching the lofty summit, dreading lest he might by taking a big deep breath exhaust all the oxygen in the atmosphere, only to hear the Creator say, “Breathe away, O man, there's plenty of air for you.” Well Spurgeon understood in a beautiful way what the testimony of this verse is. The Lord has plenty of what we need to endure.

There's a fourth point and this brings us to its culmination. God uses suffering...He uses suffering to humble us, He uses suffering to drive us to Him in intimate communion. He uses suffering to display grace which becomes to us profound blessing as it engages us in an enduring confidence that our salvation will hold in any situation. And finally, He uses suffering to perfect His power...He uses suffering to perfect His power.

Back to verse 9, second half of the verse, “Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses that the power of Christ may dwell in me.” Paul says...Look, I am glad to boast about my weaknesses because I want the power of Christ to dwell in me. And the second half of the words of our Lord recorded in verse 9, “Power is perfected in weakness,” stand behind Paul's statement. I want power, power comes through weakness. I've said this to many ministers around the world through the years, “There are not very many men who are weak enough to be powerful. There are many men who are strong enough to be impotent.”

Power in ministry is connected to weakness. It is when you lose all your own trust in your human abilities. As long as you think you're it, you're the driving force, you're the one who is pulling it all off, as long as you trust in your own strength, you are weak. Oh you may have a superficial external measure of success, long-term power, long-term impact is perfected in weakness. The suffering that humbles us, the suffering that drives us to God, the suffering that pours out grace upon grace upon

grace in our lives is the same suffering that makes us lose all trust in ourselves. We can say with Paul, "I am what I am by the grace of God. I'm the chief of sinners. I am weak, I am nothing." So no one is too weak to be powerful, but there are many far too strong. Paul says, "I gladly will be weak if by being weak the power of Christ may dwell in me." This is a joyous acceptance. This is a glad acceptance.

Here he is, turned the corner, he's crossed the mountain top, he's down the other side. He doesn't love the abuse. He doesn't love the suffering. He doesn't love the thorn or stake rammed through his otherwise proud human flesh. He doesn't love the torture to his soul because of what's going wrong in the church that he loves, He doesn't relish with some kind of delight the fact that he's being afflicted with this very depressing experience. He doesn't want to be so anxious in his soul as to be relentlessly pleading with God. But he does relish the outpouring of grace that leads to real spiritual power. He loves the grace and he loves the power.

We're not expected to love the pain. We're not expected to love the process of going to God and delivering our pain, casting our care on Him. But we are expected to love the grace and the power that comes. So I will gladly rather boast about my weaknesses, and he did it. He did it. Just go back in to chapter 11 and here he starts this in chapter 11. He's forced to boast. But how does he boast? He boasts about his weakness. Back in chapter 11, we can pick it up at verse 21, "To my shame I must say that we have been weak by comparison." Compared to the hot-shot false teachers who always promote themselves, I must appear very weak. I have nothing to commend myself of my own doing.

Go down to verse 30. "If I have to boast, I will boast of what pertains to my weakness." Chapter 12 verse 5, "But on my own behalf, middle of the verse, I will not boast except in regard to my weaknesses." All I can tell you is this, there is no way to explain my life, my ministry and its impact by looking at my abilities. No way. I am not the explanation for what has happened. I will boast about my weaknesses and when I come to the place where all I can see about myself is weakness, then the power of Christ...and here's a magnificent verb...pitches its tent in me, comes to dwell, power shows up." God aids and abets his weakness. He is weak in the natural. God hammers him to be even weaker and less likely to trust in his ability. Then God delivers sufficient grace for him to endure the hammering. And then when he's at the lowest point, he is infused with power. When we have the deepest troubles in life, pain is severest, we suffer most, and we have no hope in our own strength, we are at the premium moment like Isaiah, "Woe is me, I'm a man with a dirty mouth." God says you're exactly who I'm looking for.

God uses suffering to humble us, draw us to Himself as the only resource to display His grace and to perfect His power. When you understand that, then you can say with Paul verse 10, "Therefore, I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecution, with difficulties for Christ's sake. For when I'm weak then I'm strong." Lesson duly noted, learned. God's grace is

sufficient. I ask for prominence, God gave me humiliation. I asked for power, God gave me weakness. Then I was usable.

It was back in 1989 that a song was written, the words of which I have kept around nearby for many years. It's called "A Refiner's Fire," listen to it.

"There burns a fire with sacred heat, white hot with holy flame. And all who dare pass through its blaze will not emerge the same. Some is bronze and some is silver, some is gold. Then with great skill, all are hammered by their sufferings on the anvil of God's will. I'm learning now to trust His touch, to crave the fire's embrace. For though my past with sin was etched, His mercies did erase. Each time His purging cleanses deeper, I'm not sure that I'll survive. Yet the strength in growing weaker keeps my hungry soul alive.

And then the chorus says, "The Refiner's fire has now become my soul desire. Purged and cleansed and purified that the Lord be glorified. He is consuming my soul, refining me, making me whole. No matter what I lose, I choose the Refiner's fire." Written by a mature Christian.

When you choose the fire, you choose what the suffering produces, that's maturity. I'm not offering you a Christianity that eliminates trouble. I'm offering you a Christianity that if fully lived will cause you to suffer not just for your sin but at the hands of God in the refining process. Embrace the suffering, that's where the power lies.

Father, we again come to You at the end of this wonderful day, minds flooded, filled with the glories of these truths. And thank You again for this precious congregation of people, their love for and attentiveness to Your truth. Thank You for giving me the really unimaginable privilege of coming here week after week and helping them to gain some understanding of You that they might know You and serve You and more importantly love You and worship You more faithfully. And we do want You, Lord, to do whatever it is that You need to do to humble us, whatever it is that You need to do to draw us to Yourself, whatever it is that You need to do to unleash Your grace on us, whatever it is that makes us distrust ourselves and rest solely and only in Your power. Put us through the refining that we might come forth in the very shape and purity that pleases you. We pray in Your Son's name. Amen.

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