

My Grace is Sufficient for You (Spiritual Warfare II)

2 Corinthians 11:16-12:10

Key Verse: 12:9

“But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me.”

In today's passage Paul continues to defend his apostleship. In order to do so, he shared his experiences of suffering for Christ and of having mysterious visions. Also, he told the Corinthians why he boasted about his weaknesses. In today's key verse, Jesus said to Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Let's learn how Jesus' grace is sufficient for us. Let's learn how God works so that we can be useful to God and fruitful.

I. Paul boasts about his sufferings (11:16-29)

Look at verse 16. "I repeat: Let no one take me for a fool. But if you do, then receive me just as you would a fool, so that I may do a little boasting." Paul knew that he was foolish to boast. But he did boast. Although it is not God's way, Paul would boast in order that the Corinthians might discern between false apostles and true apostles (17-18). In verses 19-20 Paul rebuked the Corinthians' lack of discernment in an ironic tone. They were willing to put up with disgraceful treatment. They were being enslaved, exploited, taken advantage of, and slapped in the face. Paul wanted them to have spiritual discernment for their own good. It seems that the false apostles regarded Paul as weak because he did not abuse people. Paul admitted that he was too weak for that (21a). Paul wanted to liberate the foolish Corinthians. To do so, he began to boast over the false apostles.

Look at verse 22. "Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they Abraham's descendants? So am I." Some Judaizers put great confidence in their Jewish pedigree. They must have boasted about their special privilege as God's chosen people. God chose them, not so they could brag about it, but to carry out God's mission humbly. However, they misused this privilege for their own benefit. We should not do the same.

Look at verse 23a. "Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) I am more." Paul began to talk about how much he suffered for Christ. False teachers boasted as though they had a higher standing than others as Christ's servants. In response, Paul points out that a true servant of Christ is not one who talks big, but one who suffers for Christ.

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We can divide verses 23b-29 into two parts. The first part is about external trials (23b-27). The second part is about internal anguish (28-29). Paul's external trials came from hard work, persecution by both the Jews and Gentiles, a constant sense of danger, and bodily sufferings, such as sleeplessness, hunger and thirst, and being cold and naked. As God's servant, Paul suffered a lot. Naturally, we tend to be frightened by such suffering, thinking, "Must I suffer like that as God's servant?" We may wonder why God allowed Paul to suffer like that. We may wonder what the meaning of these sufferings could be. Usually people try to avoid sufferings and live an easy life. This is our natural desire. Even Christians do not want to suffer. Is it possible to live in this world without suffering? No, it is not. When we look at people, everyone is suffering. Mostly, we suffer because of our own sins of greed, selfishness, pride, laziness, lustful desires, and so on. That suffering has no meaning. It only makes one miserable and leads to destruction.

However, Christian suffering is different. It has meaning. It makes us grow and shapes us to be like Christ (Ro 5:3,4). Before knowing this truth, Peter tried to seek glory without suffering. However, when he knew the meaning of suffering, he encouraged his fellow Christians, saying, "Rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed" (1 Pe 4:13). Sufferings for Christ are a guarantee of future glory. Wow! Thank God for many missionaries around the world who are participating in the sufferings of Christ in many ways. Those who are serving in Muslim countries feel a constant sense of danger, wherever they go, feeling that they can be attacked at any moment. Many who are in Africa, Asia, the CIS and Latin America suffer from malnutrition and diseases without proper medical care. Many in America are suffering daily because they must work hard to support themselves as well as to share the gospel. The degree of suffering may be different, but everyone suffers. Since we must suffer, let's decide not to suffer for our sins, but to suffer with Christ as Paul and Peter did (1 Pe 4:15-16).

Why are sufferings always a part of Christian life and service? 2 Timothy 3:12 says, "In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted..." In John 15:18,19 Jesus said, "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you." Worldly people hate Christians because they hate Jesus and his righteousness. They persecute Christians for fear that their own evil will be exposed (Jn 3:19-21).

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Look at verses 28-29. Paul also suffered from internal anguish. He faced pressure daily from his concern for all the churches out of his great shepherd's heart. When his sheep were weak, Paul felt their weakness as his own and cried out in prayer. When someone sinned, Paul's heart burned with holy fire to save them by any means. Paul suffered much. But he taught us a right attitude toward suffering. We should not avoid sufferings, but confront sufferings with Christ, so that we may also share in his glory.

II. Paul boasts about his weaknesses (11:30-12:10)

In this part, Paul boasts in a way that is different than what the world does. Many people boast about their success, their achievements, their husbands or wives, their children, and so forth and so on. They think that if they do not boast, they will be ignored and lose the joy of life. However, since each person is busy boasting about himself, he does not hear others' boasting. Nevertheless, one's arrogant boasting damages others, leading to alienation and isolation. The main root of their boasting is pride. Pride is Satan's stronghold. The Bible says that God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. So Paul boasted about his weaknesses. This reveals God's power and encourages others. Everyone has weaknesses to boast about, if they are honest and willing to do so. But without faith, it is impossible. Let's learn how and why Paul boasted.

First, Paul boasted about his weaknesses based on facts (11:30-33). Most people boast about their strengths. Such boasting is often enhanced by exaggeration and even lies. At the same time, they try to hide their weaknesses, for fear that exposure will result in being despised and rejected. However, Paul boasted about his weaknesses. He gave a specific example to verify his truthfulness. Once, when Paul was in danger of persecution, he was lowered in a basket from a window in the wall and slipped away. Paul could do nothing except depend on God and receive help from others. He was weak. Previously, when Paul boasted about his sufferings for Christ, he sounded like a five-star general. But here he seems to be a coward, and weak, like a bird in a cage. He became a basket case, or "basket Paul." In this way Paul told the facts of how God rescued him from a dangerous situation.

Second, Paul boasted about his vision in the third person (12:1-6). False apostles shared mysterious visions as the basis to claim spiritual authority. In order to silence them, Paul mentioned his own vision. Once, Paul was caught up to paradise. He must have been led by the Holy Spirit. So he did not know whether he was in the body or out of the body; only God knew. For fourteen years Paul had

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said nothing about this vision. Many people would boast loudly and immediately about having such a vision, or even about a special dream. Of course, such mysterious spiritual experiences can deepen one's love relationship with God and bring deeper conviction of God's calling. Still, there is a danger that those who have such experiences will become proud and self-righteous. Then they can neglect the word of God, judge others and despise them, and pursue mysterious experiences only. Some arrogant people sought direct revelation from God through isolated prayer, and after having some kind of experience, became cult leaders. In order to have sound faith, our faith should be based on obedience to the word of God, the Bible, as it is lived out in Christian community. So Paul didn't boast about his experience, he spoke as if it happened to someone else (5-6).

Third, Paul explains the meaning of boasting about his weaknesses (12:7-10).

Look at verse 7. "To keep me from being conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me." The word "thorn" shows that he must have suffered from it continually. Many scholars suggest that the thorn was eye disease. The word "messenger of Satan" reveals that his disease did not come from natural causes. It was inflicted by Satan within the bounds of God's permission (cf. Job). Why was it given? To keep him from becoming conceited. Many people who experience mysterious revelations suffer from spiritual pride. Then they become useless to God and even damaging to God's people and work. God loved Paul deeply. So he allowed him a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan. We sinful human beings have a tendency to become proud when we receive God's blessings. At those times, our enemy is not outside, but inside; it is pride. When we receive God's blessings, we have to guard against inner pride, and learn Jesus' humility to the core. Otherwise, we become useless.

The thorn was so painful to Paul that he pleaded with the Lord to take it away from him (8).

Thorns of the flesh are not easy to bear. For some it may be back pain, skin disease, or high blood pressure. We can easily complain to God when we have such a thorn, ignoring all the grace we have received. We can easily doubt God's love and allow bitter roots to grow in our hearts. We can complain that God does not love us and fall into self-pity. Yet Paul did not do these things. Instead, he went to God and humbly asked God's favor. Paul prayed to God, not once, not twice, but three times. Paul's prayer reminds us of Jesus' prayer at Gethsemane. When Jesus had to take the cup of suffering and death, he prayed three times to God to take it from him. But Jesus always concluded, "Yet not my will, but yours be done." Then God sent an angel who strengthened him to endure the cross (Lk

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22:42-43). Likewise, God did not take away Paul's thorn. However, God did teach him the meaning and how to bear it.

Look at verse 9a. "But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.'" Here we learn two things. In the first place, God's grace is sufficient for us. Sometimes we complain, as if we did not receive any grace from God. Sometimes we think that God's grace for us is not enough and that we need more grace. So we pray, "Oh, Lord, give me more grace." But when we think about this deeply, we should realize that God has poured out his grace on us abundantly. He has given us the grace of forgiveness of sins. In the past we suffered from guilt, shame, sorrow, fear, and anxiety. We also suffered from the power of sin; we could not stop sinning. Some had continuous headaches or could not sleep well. Still others suffered from despair or alienation without direction or hope for the future. We could not escape from this power of sin and death. But God had mercy on us and saved us through Jesus' atoning sacrifice. On the cross, Jesus forgave all our sins and gave us eternal life and a living hope in the kingdom of God. Jesus enables us to live as holy pilgrims. God also gave us the grace of mission. Without mission, we have no real meaning or deep happiness. God gave us the most valuable and precious work to do. It is life-saving work. We did not gain this glorious mission by our own merit; it was given to us solely by God's grace. God's grace is sufficient for us. We have no reason to complain, but every reason to thank God always.

In the past Paul did not know the meaning of his thorn in the flesh. But he learned that God gave him a thorn in the flesh so that he might not be proud spiritually. Also, he could participate in the suffering of Christ. In addition, through this suffering he could experience the power of resurrection. Most people think they will be happy if they have no sufferings or troubles or pains. But that is not true. Through sufferings we can meet Jesus all the more personally and experience the deep meaning of his world and his resurrection power. So the psalmist says, "It was good for me to be afflicted, so that I might learn from your decrees" and, "Before I was afflicted I went astray. But now I obey your word" (Ps 119:71; 67).

In the second place, we learn God's way of working. Jesus said, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." God reveals his power, not through man's strength, but through man's weakness. When man is strong, he does not depend on God, but on himself. But when man is weak, he humbly depends on God. Then God can reveal his power through man's weaknesses. For example, Moses, at one time, thought that he could save Israel by his powerful speech and action. So he made a bold attempt. But he was rejected by

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his people. Then he was driven to the desert, where he lived in obscurity for 40 years, taking care of his father-in-law's sheep. He became humble enough to embrace any kind of sheep, even rebellious sheep. He became the most humble man on the face of the earth (Num 12:3). When Moses realized that he was weak, God called him and gave him the marvelous mission of delivering his people from bondage in Egypt. Charles Spurgeon was an able preacher from his youth. However, as he grew older, he developed gout which weakened him considerably. Sometimes he had no strength even to stand at the pulpit. At such times, the Holy Spirit empowered him with the most powerful messages. When Dr. Alan Wolff was not so humble, he could not succeed as an undergraduate at Northwestern. But after receiving humbleness training from the Lord, he began to depend on God. Later, he got a good job at Northwestern University. In that position, he helped over 40 UBF members to obtain proper jobs. Then he resumed study as a grad student at Northwestern, and finished a Ph.D. for the glory of God.

Look at verse 9b. "Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me." After realizing God's way of working, Paul's attitude toward weaknesses was completely changed. Now he wanted to boast about his weaknesses all the more gladly so that Christ's power might rest on him. In verse 10 he said, "That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong." Many people boast about their strength, wisdom, wealth and success. They don't want to expose their weaknesses, failures or poverty. But when Paul realized their true meaning, he could boast about his weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and difficulties for the sake of Christ. He participated in the suffering of Christ and experienced the power of resurrection. We don't need to fear our weaknesses or hide them. Our weaknesses are the opportunity to come to Christ and experience his power.

May God help us to realize that God's grace is sufficient for us. Let's come to Christ in our weakness so he may use us powerfully.