

## **My Grace is sufficient for you**

My grace is sufficient for you!

Happy Sabbath to you! It is good to be with you this morning! May the peace of God fill your hearts and minds as we listen to God's word and reflect on what it means for our lives today.

If you have your Bible with you, I invite you to open your Bible and read with me the very passage we heard for our Scripture reading this morning: 2 Cor. 12:9

I still like to read from the "real thing" – printed page, the Bible book. And I am reading from the NKJV:

*Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my strength is made perfect in weakness."*

Imagine the following situation. Here is the scene: You and I and a half-dozen other folks are flying across the country in a chartered plane. We are high in the sky. But all of a sudden the engine bursts into flames, and the pilot rushes out of the cockpit.

"We're going to crash!" he yells. "We've got to bail out!"

And so he begins to pass out life-saving parachutes to every passenger.

And while he is busy doing so he gives us a few pointers and some

important instructions as we form a line. The Pilot steps to the door and throws it wide open. And the first passenger steps up to the open door – but before he jumps he shouts over the wind: "Excuse me Sir! Could I make a request?"

"Sure, what is it?" the Pilot replies.

"Is there any way I could get a *pink* parachute?"

The pilot shakes his head in disbelief. "Isn't it enough that I gave you a parachute at all?" And so the first passenger jumps.

And the second passenger steps to the door. "I'm wondering if there is any way you could ensure that I won't get nauseated during the fall?" he asks.

"No" the Pilot responds, "but I can ensure that you will have a parachute for the fall that will save your life."

And so each of us comes with a special request and everyone receives a parachute.

"Please, captain," says one Lady, "I am afraid of heights. Would you remove my fear?"

The pilot gently pushes the Lady with her parachute out the door.

One passenger wants some goggles, another wants special boots, and one even wants to wait a little longer until the plane is closer to the ground and he does not have to jump so high from the sky.

"What's the matter with you people?" the Pilot shouts as he helps us, one by one. "Don't understand what is going on? I've given you a life saving parachute; - that is enough! This is all you need!"

See: There is only *one* item is necessary for the jump, there is only one item that will save your - and he provides it. The gift is adequate. But are we content? No. We are restless, we are anxious, yes, we are even demanding.

Frank, you might say, this is too crazy to be possible? Maybe in a plane with pilots and parachutes – up in the sky – but here on earth, and with people and grace? Isn't that a completely different ballgame?

### **The Problem: When God Says No**

I don't know about you, but I would not be surprised if everyone of us who is here this morning has had specific times in your life, when the *one* thing you desperately wanted, when the one thing you wanted to have by all means, was the one thing you never got.

May be you said to God: "Dear God, if only I could have a girl-friend, a boy-friend, like all my other friends have, then Lord!..."

"Lord, if only I had enough money to pay back all my debt, then Lord..."

"Lord, if only I could get this well paid job, if only I would be accepted in this ivy-league University... then Lord"...

“Lord if only this very difficult situation at my work, at home, with my spouse, with my children, with my neighbors could be solved, Lord. That sucks all my energies, then Lord...”

“If you could only take this terrible pain away and heal this dreadful sickness, then Lord...”

“If you could only take away my loneliness and help me to overcome my isolation, then Lord...”

Not that you are overly picky or demanding; - no- all you do is claiming the well known promise in Phil. 4:6 that states that you can "ask God for everything you need" (Phil. 4:6, *NCV*). All you want is an open door, is this extra day, is this one answered prayer, for which you will be thankful.

And so you pray and wait.

No answer.

You **pray** and wait.

No answer.

You pray and you **wait**...

May I ask you a very important question this morning? What would you do if God says no?

What if the request that is so important to you is delayed or even denied? How will you respond? If God says, "Frank - I've given you My grace, and that is enough," will you be content?

Contentment. See – contentment is a state of heart in which you have inner peace even if God would not give you more than he has already given you! Would you be content?

You beg God fervently, you even wrestle with God, to please save the life of your only child who is sick.

You plead with God to somehow keep your business afloat, so that you don't have to get unemployed and can continue to make your payments for your house and car...

You implore God to please remove that painful cancer from your body or to keep your loved one alive. What if God's answer is: "My grace is enough! My grace is sufficient for you!" Would you be content?

You see, from heaven's perspective, grace is enough. From heavens perspective grace is fully sufficient. If God did nothing more than save us from eternal death, could anyone of us complain? If God has given us eternal life, dare we grumble at an aching body? If we've been given heavenly riches, dare we bemoan earthly poverty?

Now, let me be quick to add that God has not left you with "just his eternal salvation." If you have eyes to see around and recognize the

colors and the shape of things, to read your Bible or a good book, - if you have hands to touch another person, or to open a book to read it, if you have the means to own it or to buy the beautiful clothes you wear on Sabbath morning, God has already given you much, much more than just his grace. The vast majority of us who are here this morning, have been blessed with much, much more than just eternal life! Amen?!

But there are times when God, having given us His grace, still hears our appeals and says, "My grace, Frank, is sufficient for you." Is God being unfair? When he responds that way? That is the question I pose this morning.

I still distinctly remember an incident with our oldest son, Jonathan. Our family was in Michigan, where I was studying for my doctorate at Andrews University. Writing a dissertation is a demanding task and so I spend long hours in the library and often just would quickly come home to eat something and then head back to the library. Because we didn't have much money, I often rode my bicycle from the library. One day, I was home, quickly eating lunch with my wife and my son, and was just about ready to get back when my little three or four year old boy Jonathan asked me a favor: "Daddy, could you please take me with the bicycle to the playground nearby?" "Of course I can", I said. I took my little son, and placed him on the back rack of my bicycle. I

told him to keep his little legs stretched out until we arrived at the nearby playground. And off we started. But because he did not pay attention and I did not pay attention, something terrible happened: While we were riding full speed, somehow his little foot got too close to the back wheel and got entangled in the spokes of the wheel. And because we were going so fast, his little foot kind of got squeezed between the frame of the bike and the spokes of the wheel and one of the spokes cut deep, very deep into his flesh.

Off course we both fell to the ground and he was bleeding and crying. I somehow was able to release his little foot, took him in my arms and ran as fast as I could back home. I called for my wife and told her: “Ulrike, quick, we have to go to the ambulance immediately”. So my wife took little Jonathan in her arms and I drove our car to the next ambulance in Berrien Center, where the doctors had to close the bleeding wound with five stiches.

I still distinctly remember, how we sat in the waiting room of the hospital waiting for Jonathan to come back from the surgery and when the doctor came out and told us that we were lucky, because if that spoke would have cut one more cm it would have cut Jonathan’s Achilles heel. And then he would not have been able to move his foot any more. When we received this good news, I still remember, how I told God how wonderful He was for protecting Jonathan and that he would be able to play soccer again and jump and run and walk. But

then, all of a sudden, it hit me, as clearly as if God Himself were speaking, this question came to mind: *Frank, would I be less wonderful if Jonathan's foot would remain stiff? Frank would I be a less good God if he could not do sports any more? Frank, would I still be receiving your praise this morning if I had not saved him?*

Q: Is God still a good God when He says no? This is the question before us!

### **The Plea: Remove the Thorn**

See – the apostle Paul knew such a situation. In 2Corinthians he writes: *“To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”*

—2 Cor. 12:7–9

Paul knew the angst of unanswered prayer. And at the top of his prayer list was that unidentified request to which he gave the code name: "a thorn in my flesh." Perhaps the pain was too intimate to put it on paper. Maybe the request was already made so often that he reverted to shorthand: "I'm here to talk about the thorn again, Father." Or could it be that by leaving the appeal generic, Paul's prayer could be our prayer?

Don't we all have a thorn in the flesh?

Somewhere on life's path our flesh is pierced by another person or a problem. Our stride becomes a limp, our pace is slowed to a halt. And then we try to walk again only to wince at every step because the situation is so painful. And finally can take it no more and we plead to God for help.

Such was the case with Paul.

You don't get a thorn unless you're on the move, and Paul never stopped. If he wasn't preaching he was in prison because of his preaching. But his walk was hampered by this thorn. That thorn pierced through the sole of his sandal and into the soul of his heart and soon became a matter of intense prayer. "Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take [this thorn] away from me." – he writes.

This was no casual request. Nor was this a superficial prickle. It was a "stabbing pain" (Phillips). Every step Paul took sent a shudder up his leg. Three different times he limped over to the side of the trail and prayed. His request was clear, and so was God's response, "My grace is sufficient for you."

What was this thorn in the flesh? No one knows for sure, but perhaps it was his sexual temptations.

Paul was battling his flesh. After all, Paul was a single man. He describes the temptations like one who knew them firsthand. "*I want to*

*do the things that are good, but I do not do them. I do not do the good things I want to do, but I do the bad things I do not want to do"* (Ro. 7:18–19, *NCV*). Perhaps, Paul was asking God to once and for all deliver him from the thirst for forbidden waters?

Or was his problem the fierce opposition he had to face? And Paul had his good share of opponents. Some questioned his apostleship, we read (2 Cor. 12:12). Some undermined his message of grace (Gal. 1:7). And when Paul wrote that this messenger of Satan was sent "to beat me," he wasn't exaggerating. In 2Cor. 11:23-26 – just a few Verses earlier we read:

*I have been near death many times. Five times the Jews have given me their punishment of 39 lashes with a whip. Three different times I was beaten with rods. One time I was almost stoned to death. Three times I was in ships that wrecked, and one of those times I spent a night and a day in the sea. I have gone on many travels and have been in danger from rivers, thieves, my own people, the Jews, and those who are not Jews. I have been in danger in cities, in places where no one lives, and on the sea. And I have been in danger with false Christians. ... and on and on it goes...* (2 Cor. 11:23–26, *NCV*)

Could anyone fault Paul for asking for a reprieve? (to be released from such experiences?)

**Most likely this thorn might have been his Physical weakness.** A

good case can be made that Paul's thorn was his poor eye-sight.

Remember his words at the end of one of his letters? "*See what large letters I use as I write to you with my own hand*" (Gal. 6:11). Maybe

his eyes were bad. Maybe he never fully recovered from that trip to

Damascus. God had appeared to him in a brilliant light, so bright Paul was left blind for three days. His clear vision of the cross may have come at the cost of a clear vision of his physical ability to see clearly.

To the Christians in Galatia he wrote: "*If you could have done so, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me*" (Galatians 4:15).

See, It's hard to travel if you can't see the trail. And in those days there was not the ease and comfort of air-conditioned cars, or fast trains, or even airplanes. No, he had to travel by foot.

It is not easy to write epistles if you can't clearly see the page you write on. And poor vision leads to strained eyes, which in turn leads to headaches, which leads to long nights and even longer prayers for relief. "God, is there any chance I could see clearly again?" Every speaker knows it's hard to interact with and impress the crowd if you can't establish eye contact with whom you speak.

Or was it his **Poor speaking skills.** We often assume Paul was a dynamic speaker, but those who heard him apparently thought

differently. "*For some say, "His letters are weighty and forceful, but*

*in person he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing.”* (2 Corinthians 10:10, NIV84)

To my knowledge the apostle didn't argue with them.

So here is the apostle Paul. Tempted often. Beaten regularly. Opinionated. Dim-sighted. Thick-tongued. No wonder he prayed. Perhaps. But may be not!

### **The Principle: Grace Is Enough**

Wouldn't Paul have been a better apostle with no temptation, no enemies and no opposition, a calm demeanor, good eyes, and an eloquent tongue?

Perhaps. But then again, maybe not.

Had God removed all his temptations, Paul may never have embraced God's grace. Only the hungry value a feast, and Paul was starving. He called himself "Paul, Chief of Sinners." No pen ever articulated grace like Paul's. That may be because no person ever appreciated and needed grace like he did.

Had God stilled the whips, Paul may have never known true love. Persecution distills our true motives. In the end Paul's motives were distilled to one force: "The love of Christ controls and compels us" (2 Cor. 5:14, *NCV*).

Had God made Paul all meek and mild, who would have faced the legalists, confronted the hedonists, and challenged the judgmentalists? The reason the letter of Galatians is in your Bible is because Paul couldn't stomach a diluted grace. Paul's honesty may not have made many friends, but it sure made many disciples.

And Paul's eyes. If God had healed his eyesight, would Paul have had such deep spiritual insights? While the rest of the world was watching the world, Paul was seeing visions too great for human words (2 Cor. 12:3-4).

And public speaking? Nothing intoxicates like the approval of the masses and the cheering of the crowd. But the God who despises pride did whatever was necessary to keep Paul from becoming proud. In this case, He simply told him, "My grace is sufficient for you."

In your case, He may be saying the same thing.

Why doesn't God remove temptation from your life – you may ask? If He did, perhaps you might lean on your strength instead of His grace. A few stumbles might be what you need to convince you: His grace is sufficient for your sin.

Why doesn't God remove the enemies in your life and if you don't have real enemies, at least some of those nasty and difficult people? Perhaps because He wants you to love like He loves. Anyone can love

a friend – that’s easy, but only a few can love those who are not kind to you. So what do you do, when you realize you aren’t everyone’s hero? His grace is sufficient for your self-image.

Why doesn’t God alter your personality? You say things you later regret or do things you later question. Why doesn’t God make you more like Him? He is. He’s just not finished yet. Until He is, His grace is sufficient to overcome your flaws.

Why doesn’t God heal you? He can do it and he may choose to heal parts of your body before heaven. But if He doesn’t, He still loves you and don’t you still have reason for gratitude? If He never gave you more than eternal life, could you ask for more than that? His grace is sufficient for gratitude.

Why won’t God give you a skill? If only God had made you a singer or a runner or a writer or a missionary. But there you are, tone-deaf, slow of foot and mind. Don’t despair. Let Paul remind you that the power is in the message, not the messenger. God’s grace is sufficient to speak clearly even when you don’t.

For all we don’t know about thorns, we can be sure of this. God would rather we have an occasional limp than a perpetual strut. And if it takes

a thorn for Him to make His point, He loves us too much not to pluck it out.

In the OT there is a fascinating Psalm that echos the same idea that Paul has written in the NT. In Psalm 73.

It starts in Vs. 1, where we read: “Surely, God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart”. But then the Psalmist describes on of the toughest challenges any believer can face on this earth: the apparent lurch and success and happiness of those who do not believe in God. You can easily go shipwreck in your faith over this issue. And the Psalmist almost did, until he went to the sanctuary and watched their end. And so he ends this remarkable Psalm with the words:

*“Whom have I in heaven but you? And besides you I desire nothing on earth.”* This is how it is worded in the OT. In the NT Paul writes: “my grace is sufficient for you”

See - God has every right to say no to us. We have every reason to say thanks to Him. His grace is fully sufficient. The parachute He provides for our salvation is strong, and the landing will be safe. For his amazing grace is all we need! AMEN<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Much of my sermon was taken from an article by Max Lucado, “Parachutes, Thorns, and Grace, in *Discipleship Journal, Issue 96* (November/December 1996) (NavPress, 1996).