

Grace For Our Weakness

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[0 : 00] We can turn back to our reading in 2 Corinthians chapter 12. I'll just read again at verse 9 and verse 10. 2 Corinthians chapter 12, verse 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 of my weakness, 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.

As we come to these words and we see the strength and weakness that it speaks of, do you feel strong today?

And if you do feel strong, then what or who is giving you that strength? Where is that strength coming from? Or if maybe you feel weak today, maybe you're feeling that weakness as you come in here today.

[1 : 08] And maybe you're asking, well, where can I find strength to help in this weakness? That's really what Paul is describing for us here in these verses.

There's much in these verses, but I want us to think today of grace for our weakness. When I was younger, at Christmas time, one of my favorite programs was The World's Strongest Man. It's much simpler to find it when there was only three or four channels to choose from, but it was one of these programs I would always look forward to watching. And seeing these men who were just so well built, moving trucks or just big barrels of weights, and just things that you seem to think would be impossible to do, they're able to do it in their strength.

I always loved watching that. Nowadays, I think it usually takes place over the summer months, about June, and last year was actually a Scotsman, Tom Stoltman, from Invergordon, who won that title of The World's Strongest Man.

And when you look at them, you immediately think of strength and power. They just look as if they're strong, the bulging arms and legs, their height, the breadth of their shoulders.

[2 : 27] Everything about them just looks powerful. And when you see pictures of them beside ordinary people, they look so tiny in comparison.

Even people who may be over six foot, they still look so small beside these giants who are so powerful. But are they strong? Or do they have weaknesses?

You can imagine us trying to go up against them in one of these competitions. We couldn't even move the things that they're lifting with one hand. But are they always strong?

How strong are they? Do they have weaknesses? Well, they do. They have weaknesses. And very often, these weaknesses develop over time because of the pressures that they're putting on their bodies.

The strain takes its toll. And very often, later in life, even still in young life, they end up crippled. And some have even died young because of the strain put on their hearts.

[3 : 26] So they may look strong, but there's a weakness in them. And as you're reading through 2 Corinthians, this section that we've been reading, you have these super apostles, and you have Paul the apostle.

And almost as you're looking at them, they would say there's no comparison. But what we find is, just like these world's strongest men, there is weakness behind everybody.

And we are the same ourselves. There are times when we can feel strong, but yet there's still a weakness in us. And there are times when we can feel weak, and yet we know that there is a strength with us that is beyond anything that we can manage ourselves.

And that's what Paul is saying here, what the grace of God gives us, this strength, this grace that is always sufficient, for in our weakness, his strength is made perfect in us.

So when you look at the city of Corinth, to which Paul was writing, and to which he administered, you find that this was a place that was strong in many ways. The city itself was strong and powerful, financially powerful, politically powerful, full of people from all over the place, many who were wealthy and powerful people.

[4 : 46] And so there was a lot of strength, as it was perceived in this city. And they also had these super apostles, as we see in verse 5 of chapter 11. That's how they're described.

These super apostles, they're strong in many ways. There's this aura about them. And this message that they have, that they bring, is so appealing to others.

And the people are being influenced by these, and they're thinking, well, here is the strength that we need to stand in ourselves now. We've had what Paul has given us, but let's hear what they're saying about Paul.

How could God give someone the gospel that is true if he's suffering so much, but that they can find strength in this new message that these super apostles have?

So there's perceived strength in Corinth in so many ways. And then you look at Paul, who on the other hand is a prisoner, writing to the church at Corinth, someone who has, as he's describing here, been given a thorn in the flesh, a weakness that's hindering him in many ways, something he's asked and pleaded with the Lord three times to take away from him, and yet the Lord is using it, a weakness, to remind him that his strength is not in himself, but in God.

[6 : 06] He's described as a fool, a madman, in all these different ways. But he uses this, this perceived weakness, to show them where strength is found.

He has a strength that is not his own, but it's of the Lord. So who is weak and who is strong in this passage? And how can we learn lessons for ourselves today from this passage as we think of how we can see or perceive ourselves as strong or recognize our weaknesses and yet find strength?

God is the one who is able to give this strength. My grace is sufficient for you, he says, for my power is made perfect in weakness.

So are you strong today? And what is that strength? Where is it from? Or are you weak today? And where can you find the strength that helps in that weakness?

We want to look at it under two headings. The first is looking at the strong, the strength. Those who are strong, yet weak without faith.

[7 : 23] And then those who feel weak, but are strong with faith. So just these two headings. Strong, but weak without faith. Weak, yet strong with faith.

So strong, but weak without faith. What is the problem in Corinth? What is the problem with me? What is the problem with you? Well, when you look at Corinth and look at ourselves, we could have a whole list of things that are problems. What's wrong with us?

We could go on and on. And there are many problems you could probably hide, and Corinth that are very similar to ourselves today. But one of the problems that stands out here is that they are easily swayed.

They're easily pulled in a different direction. And this is something that can affect us as well. You see, they're being influenced by the latest teachings.

[8 : 24] These super apostles, as they're described, have come in, and they're preaching against Paul and the message he had, and they're presenting a new gospel for the people to believe in.

And so they're being influenced in this way. Something new, something exciting comes along, grabs their attention, and starts to lead them away from the gospel that Paul had given to them. Paul preached the gospel of Jesus Christ. He didn't preach that everything would be straightforward and perfect.

He preached that there would be challenges and problems along the way, as there always is. But yet these other apostles come, and they're proclaiming that surely someone who is trusting in the Lord shouldn't suffer in this way.

And there's a warning for ourselves there today as well. If we are listening to the gospel of Jesus Christ, then we should see that it's a gospel that doesn't mean that we are not going to go through challenges, that we are not going to suffer along the way.

[9 : 35] And we see today that there are those who will come in, and they can be described as the super apostles of today, who have this message that seems appealing, that seems good, that

seems right, that they'll say that, well, if you're suffering, it's because your faith isn't strong enough. It's your fault. It's on you. You've got to change yourself in some way. They'll come in and say these things, and they can seem so plausible, and the fault can seem to be with us. But then we're to see that Jesus himself has said, in this world, you will have many troubles. So Jesus, and trusting in Jesus, isn't the means of getting away from all the troubles of this world. Far from it. We will go through troubles like everybody else. And we will go through all these different challenges. And Paul himself outlines that for us in verse 23 to verse 29 of chapter 11. There's a whole list of things there that he goes through, of the imprisonments, the labors he's gotten, the beatings, the near-death experience, the lashes.

[10:48] He goes through this long list of things that he suffered because of his faith. And these super apostles are saying, well, surely if Paul was really trusting in the Lord, these things wouldn't happen.

Therefore, listen to us, that we have a more superior message to give, one that will truly help you to achieve all things.

But they are boasting in themselves. They are boasting as Hebrews. They are boasting as Israelites. They are boasting as the offspring of Abram. They are boasting as the servant of Christ. All of it sounds plausible. All of it sounds good. But the message that they have is wrong. And what Paul does is highlight this, that they are boasting in the flesh, that they are boasting in themselves.

They may have strength, as it would seem outwardly. They may have this aura about them that looks so strong and what other people should desire.

[11:54] They may feel that they are strong, but ultimately they have no faith. They are not trusting in Jesus Christ. They are not trusting in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

And without faith, they have nothing. The same as ourselves. Without faith, we have nothing. We have no strength of ourselves. Jesus teaches that in John 15, verse 5.

Apart from me, you can do nothing. When he's preaching about the vine and the branches. Apart from me, you can do nothing. But that's what these super apostles are saying.

It's the opposite. That you can do it. So what do you rely on today? Where is your strength today? Is it in yourself?

Is it in your faith? Or your works? Or whatever you are doing? Martin Luther once said, God our Father has made all things depend on faith.

[12:54] So that whoever has faith will have everything. And whoever does not have faith will have nothing. Faith to know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

That all sufficient grace. The writer to the Hebrews in chapter 11, verse 6 says as well, Without faith, it is impossible to please him.

For whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. It's about faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

These super apostles and the people who were believing in him, they felt strong, they had confidence, but it would be their downfall if they continued in this way because they didn't know the grace of God.

So are you strong today? And what is your strength today? We could say in so many ways, I'm strong.

[14:01] I'm doing fine. Things are going well in my life. I don't have worries. I'm a good person. We can list it off. We can have all of these things that sound good and sound as if we are strong in ourselves.

But do you have faith? Do you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ? Do you know his grace that is all sufficient? Apart from him, you can do nothing.

It's one of these fables, one of these stories told to give an illustration. And it's about a stag that is drinking from a pool of water. And as he's drinking from the pool of water, he's seeing his reflection in the water.

And he's looking at himself like a mirror, the reflection on the water. And he's seeing his antlers so big, so powerful, and he's so proud of them.

But then in his image that he sees in the water, he sees his little spindly legs. And he's so disappointed that they're so small and insignificant. And he's thinking, what rubbish legs I have.

[15:09] But then he's disturbed by the sound of a mountain lion behind him. And he has to run. And it's these spindly legs that carry him fast away from the mountain lion into a forest where then his antlers get caught up in the thickets there.

And he ends up trapped because of these antlers. And the mountain lion catches him and diverges. What's the story telling us? Well, it's telling us to look in the mirror.

And what do we see? What do you see when you look in the mirror today? What do you take pride in? What do you boast in of yourself? What strengths do you see? Or what do you think is strong? And what things do you see as a weakness? What things do you think will hinder you and that you would want to be better? So often when we look in the mirror, we look at ourselves.

And think we can do things ourselves. That we can be strong of ourselves. That faith is like the spindly legs that seem so insignificant, so weak. That we're weak to have faith in God when we can manage by ourselves.

[16:19] But it's our faith that is able to save. Not ourselves. And the faith that we have in the Lord Jesus Christ. So what do we see when we look in the mirror?

What gives us strength today? What weaknesses do we see? And do we have it the right way around? Well, Paul goes on to show us weakness, yet strength in faith.

And that's what we want to see. We can feel weak in our faith and in the gospel. But when we are with Christ, when we are in Christ, that is what our strength is.

And so Paul describes his own weakness, and yet the strength that he gets from God. And that's what we need. Weak yet strong in faith.

How does Paul counter the super apostles? What arguments does he present? Well, he shows that he boasts in the same things.

[17:28] And this can sound a little maybe stupid at first to say, why is he boasting in the same things? Well, he's boasting in the same things, but with a different reason. He's boasting to highlight the grace that God gives.

So he is able to say the same things that the apostles are able to say as well. Are they Hebrews, he says in verse 22? So am I.

Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they the offspring of Abraham? So am I. Are they servants of Christ? I am a Bethel. So he's boasting in exactly the same things, but he is boasting in them by the grace that God has given him.

Not to put himself, to promote himself, but to promote the praising of God. And then he goes on to talk about this experience that he had.

14 years ago, he speaks about this in verse 2, going down there. We're not going to go into the details of this. Paul himself almost says he's not clear exactly in it anyway.

[18:37] But we're not going to go into the details. But he has this experience with God that he could easily make a boast. That he could easily come up against the super apostles and say, well, you have your experience of God.

This is mine. That I was taken up into heaven. That I was caught up into paradise, as he says. He could easily make this the argument to show, I have been given a superior message by God.

But he doesn't. He was given something that he says in verse 4, I heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter. And so he was shown something, but he's not able to tell what.

But then he shows that in order not to make him proud and boastful, the Lord gave him a weakness. In verse 7, So to keep me from being too elated by the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from being too elated.

To keep him from boasting, he was given this weakness. And people have speculated about what this weakness was. We don't maybe know entirely what it is.

[19:53] But he was given something in his own life and experience. And he pleaded with God to take it away from him three times. But then the Lord gave him these words.

Such precious words. 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.

And therefore I will boast, he said, all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

God allowed this into his life. God gave him this weakness, this thorn in the flesh to keep him humble.

And to keep him with his focus on glorifying God and the grace that God is able to give. God allows experiences in life that can be difficult, that can be hard, but that ultimately that can assure us of the sufficiency of the grace of God.

[21 : 05] My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. And then he goes on to say in verse 10, at the end of it, when I am weak, then I am strong.

And behind all of this is a reminder not to look to the super apostles, not to look to a gospel that sounds great and wonderful, but has no substance to it and no reality to it, that says there will be no suffering if you believe this, but to look to the true gospel of Jesus Christ.

And to see that whatever experience we have, that God is able to give grace in it. So whether we are going through illness, whether we are going through grief, whether we are going through multitude of challenges in our life, that God is able to say, I am able to give you the grace that is sufficient.

The grace that will keep us and sustain us through it all. And what is our greatest reminder in this? Well, it's a reminder that brings us back to Jesus and what he's done. What did he do for his people? What did he do for you as you believe in him?

[22 : 34] Where do we look? We don't look in the mirror and look at ourselves. We look to the cross. And there we see what Christ has done for us.

For it is reminding us that everything that comes our way has been foreordained by God, but that he gives grace to help.

It is all part of God's plan. This was a messenger from Satan. It's described as here. He gave a messenger from Satan to hinder him, to harass him, to keep him from being too elated.

And God gives things in our life that can seem as if it's from Satan himself. Job, in the Old Testament, was plagued by so many things, by Satan who was allowed to take him and to do things to him that seemed so cruel, and yet God kept him in it.

And when you look at the cross, it seems like Satan is victorious there. That Judas, Satan put it in his heart to betray Jesus.

[23 : 47] That at the hands of wicked men, Satan used them to crucify the Lord Jesus. And yet when you read about what happened at the cross as it speaks of it in Acts chapter 2, it says there that Jesus was delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God.

That God knew exactly what was going on. That God, this was all part of God's plan. And so that as Paul is looking at his life and he looks at this list in chapter 11 of all the things that he has suffered, they don't make him any less than apostle.

But he suffered them on behalf of his Lord Jesus Christ. And in all things he could say, my grace is sufficient. The grace of God was sufficient for all things.

So God knows. God has mapped out our lives. He knows everything that we need and when we need it. And he has grace to give. Charles Simeon.

He lived in the 17 and 1800s. He was a preacher. And one time he was waiting to conduct a funeral in a cemetery. He was waiting for them to arrive where he was going to conduct the funeral.

[25 : 04] And while he was waiting, he decided to have a walk around the cemetery. And he liked to look in the cemetery at things that were written on the gravestones. Maybe more so than different kinds of words were written on it.

Not just scripture texts, but different things. And one caught his eye. And when he read it, it said this, When from the dust of death I rise to claim my mansion in the skies, even then shall this be all my plea.

Jesus hath lived and died for me. And that just caught his attention. When we rise from the dust, Jesus hath lived and died for me.

A statement of faith. And he was so struck by these words that he was looking around for someone to share what he'd just read with. Wanted someone else to see these words.

And he was caught by seeing a young woman nearby who was obviously distressed. And he approached her and said, Come and read these words. See if they will help you.

[26 : 11] And she read these words, Jesus hath lived and died for me. And he shared with her the gospel. And he spoke to her. And he even took her name and her address.

And he went to visit her the next day, knowing that she'd been so distressed. And what he found in the house was a dire situation. It was a home afflicted with poverty.

This woman's mother was dying with asthma. She had two children who were sick and suffering in so many different ways. And he was just taken up by this.

And he helped them. He sought help for them in different ways. And their lives were transformed.

And later on, that woman spoke to him about the day that he had come to her in the cemetery.

And she said to him, I had been there for five hours in despair. Despairing of life. Despairing of my future. Contemplating my very life.

[27 : 15] Until you came and showed me what was written. And she said, that was the moment I realized that Christ is able to help.

That his grace is available to me. Her life was changed by the grace of God. And that is the power of the grace of God.

It's not about being strong in ourselves. It's not about boasting in ourselves. It's about seeing our weakness.

That we are frail and fragile people. That we all have troubles that we cannot face up to by ourselves. That there is a gracious and a loving God who is able to help.

Who is able to say, my grace is sufficient for you. For my power is made perfect in weakness.

[28 : 16] What are you relying on for your strength today? There's a hymn called, I could not do without thee. One of the verses says this.

I could not do without thee. I cannot stand alone. I have no strength or goodness, no wisdom of my own. But thou, beloved Saviour, art all in all to me.

And weakness will be power if leaning hard on thee. Are you leaning on the Saviour today? We can go on trying to pretend that we have perceived strength of ourselves.

which is reality, which is reality a weakness if we have not faith. But if we even feel weak today, if we feel so uncertain about so many things in our life, the life of others or the world in which we live, but we have faith, then we can be strong and know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

may he help us to come, not in our strength, but in our weakness, to know his strength made perfect and his grace that is always sufficient.

[29 : 37] Let us pray. Lord, our gracious God, we do thank you for the grace that you give in times of need. We thank you that it is ever sufficient and help us not to be swayed by the things of this world that say we will be strong in them, that we would recognize that without faith we have nothing, but by faith we have all that we need.

We have everything in Christ for now and for eternity. So in our weakness, Lord, may you help us by your grace that we may be able to say when I am weak, then I am strong.

We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. We're going to conclude by singing to God's praise in Psalm 27.

Sing Psalm's version, Psalm 27, page 32. We'll sing from verse 11 down to the end of the psalm, these three stanzas. Psalm 27 at verse 11.

Teach me, O Lord, who I should live and lead me in your way. Make straight my path because my foes oppress me every day. Give me not over to the will of vehement enemies, for liars rise to slander me and breathe out cruelties.

[30 : 56] Yet I am sure that in this life God's goodness I will see. Wait for the Lord, be strong, take heart. For him wait patiently. We'll sing these three stanzas to God's praise.

Teach me, O Lord, how I should live and lead me in your way.

make straight my path because my foes oppress me every day.

Give me not over to the will of vehement enemies.

For liars rise to slander me and breathe out cruelties.

[32 : 16] Yet I am sure that in this life God's goodness I will see.

wait for the Lord. Wait for the Lord, be strong, take heart. For him wait patiently.

After the benediction, I'll go to the door to my left. We'll close with the benediction. Now may grace, mercy and peace from God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit rest upon and abide with you all now and forevermore.

Amen. Amen. Amen.