

**2 Corinthians 12:7–10** Therefore, to keep me from becoming arrogant due to the extraordinary nature of these revelations, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me, so that I would not become arrogant. <sup>8</sup>Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that he would take it away from me. <sup>9</sup>And he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, because my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will be glad to boast all the more in my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may shelter me. <sup>10</sup>That is why I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties, for the sake of Christ. For whenever I am weak, then am I strong.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, I look out and I see a lot of weakness. Aching bones, failing eyes, sore joints, stiff backs. I see canes and walkers and wheel chairs. Getting older is a lot to deal with. Yes, I look out and I see weakness, and not just in our more venerable members, but in our kids too. Still relying on Mom and Dad, Grandma and Grandpa for their most basic needs, unable to deal with any of it on their own. Yes, I see weakness too in those of you in your 20s and 30s and 40s. Struggles at work and at home, perhaps asking the question daily, “How am I going to deal with this?”

I look out and I see weakness. Isn’t it great!? That’s what Paul says in our reading this morning, in not so many words — **He delighted in his weaknesses and difficulties**. I doubt that’s our first, second, or third reaction to the list of our weaknesses that I began with.

I love it when I wake up and my back hurts. I love it when I can’t hear my grandkids, when I can’t see what I’m looking at. When I’m overwhelmed at work, or at home. No! It’s more like, God please take this away! Make it go away, make it better. Three times Paul prayed to God to take away his “thorn in the flesh.” I bet we’ve got him beat. Three times? How about for years?

And living in this sinful world, living in our sinful flesh, being attacked by the devil, our response to the struggles and difficulties, our weaknesses is often, “Why God? Why does it always seem like you are doing the bare minimum in my life?”

Now of course that’s not true and we can probably all think of times where our attitude was the exact opposite — “Wow, look how God has blessed me!” Sure.

But in some instances, we sinners all have to admit, the feeling has been there, *God, can’t you just do a little more? It’s as if we’re fighting against God. Is he trying to see how much I can take? Why would he do such a thing. I’ve had it. I’m done. It’s not fair.* And while we may not turn our back completely on God, we, at least for the time being aren’t really on speaking terms with him. That’s a dangerous place to be, so confused by the devil’s tricks to get us to see God in such a sinful light. We find ourselves like Jonah, sulking under the fig tree, mad at the world, no, mad at God.

When God’s first introduces us to the devil in his Word, he calls him crafty. He had to be to take the first human beings, perfect and holy, and turn them against God. And if he did that to our perfect parents, how much more easily can he do that to sinners like us? Don’t fall for it! Don’t fall for his narrative or his point of view when it comes to God. The devil has lost. He’s doomed, already been damned. Don’t buy into his tricks to get you to end up for eternity with him.

Paul brings us back to reality. No where does he say that our troubles should be, or will be, easy. He calls *his* a “thorn in the flesh, that torments him.” Three times Paul prayed that God would take it away, and God’s answer was, “No. My grace is sufficient for you.”

Probably not what Paul wanted to hear, but it was what he needed to hear. **My grace is sufficient for you**. In other words, while God wasn’t going to take this thorn away, God wasn’t going to abandon him either. ‘**My grace is sufficient for you**’ took the focus off of Paul’s suffering, his thorn, what Paul thought God should be doing — “take it away” — and put it on all that God had done for him already, purely out of grace.

Grace sufficient enough to take away not only Paul’s sins, but the sins of the world. Grace sufficient enough to give up God’s one and only Son to live, suffer, and die to make it happen. Grace sufficient enough to take a man like Paul, who had persecuted and killed Christians, and change his heart, brought him to faith, made him a champion of all Christ had done. That same grace would sustain him through whatever struggles and suffering he endured.

And God’s grace has done the same for us — taken all our sins away, made us right with God, prepared a home in heaven with him. No, not the bare minimum, but more than we could have ever asked or imagined. Certainly his grace is sufficient enough to see us through whatever this life brings our way.

And at the same time, God makes it clear here that he uses those thorns in our lives to serve his good purpose, and ours. In Paul's case it was to keep him from becoming arrogant. Paul had the message that everyone wanted to hear, the greatest news in all the world — about Jesus, about God's free grace and eternal life for all. He was the guy, *the* missionary, *the* evangelist. At one point a group of people thought so highly of him that they wanted to offer sacrifices to him as if he were Greek God in human form. To keep Paul from thinking that this power was from him, and to keep his hearers from thinking the same, God allowed Paul to suffer from some kind of ailment, a weakness of some sort, to keep the focus on the word, the Gospel, to remind Paul and everyone else that that's where the power to change hearts comes from, that's where the power of our salvation is found.

God uses the same sorts of things in our lives, our weaknesses, to remind us that that's where our power is, where our strength lies, where our salvation is found. Not in ourselves, but in our God through his Word and Sacraments. On our own we are lost. How do you know that? Yes, God's word tells us, but also from our weaknesses. How could we go on dealing with all that we have to deal with our lives if it wasn't for God's grace. There but by the grace of God go I.

Which brings us to Paul's final point and the reason he, and we, can delight in our weaknesses. God's power is made perfect in them. If everything always worked out the way we wanted things too, or if we never had any struggles, would we have any need to connect ourselves to Christ as our Savior? Why would we? Wouldn't our attitude be, nope, I'm good on my own. And if that's your attitude now, look out! A lesson on how wrong you are could be right around the corner — to bring you back to a right understanding of your need for God's grace and power in your life.

Take a look at any character from the Bible. It's almost as if God chooses at times to showcase their weaknesses so that it's clear they did nothing on their own. From Noah to Abraham, Jacob to Joseph, King David and Solomon, all of the disciples, and Paul, they all had weaknesses. And yet how clearly the power of God shines through in the accounts of each of those men. God's power is made perfect in weakness, and it's still true today, in our lives.

If the most powerful person in the world trusts only in himself, and the weakest person in the world trusts in God, who would you rather be? Better, who is stronger? The powerful man standing by himself, thinking

he's got it all figured out, or the weak man knowing just how weak he is, trusting in a God who gave his one and only Son to die for him. Where would you rather be? Alone, or with a God who loves you so much he gave his son for you? Alone with your sins or with your Savior who took all your sins away? Alone on the road to who knows where, (we know it's hell), or with your Savior and his promise that because he lives, you also will live, forever with him in heaven? Alone, or with your Savior who sits at the right hand of God ruling all things for your ultimate, eternal good? When I am weak, then am I strong!

When we think that God has only done the minimum in our lives, that's the devil's trick to shift our focus onto ourselves. Focus on Christ. **My grace is sufficient for you!** For you God sent Jesus into the world to be your Savior. For you Jesus went the way of the cross, suffered and died for your sins, ever single one. For you he rose from the dead so that from that day forward you could be assured that you too will rise. He sent the Holy Spirit into your heart to make all these blessings of God yours by faith. For you he instituted the Lord's supper to strengthen and sustain your faith. He's given you a pastor, not just me, but for most of you, a pastor throughout your lives to lead you and guide you always back to your Savior. He's sheltered you and strengthened you. When times were tough he always was there, knowing the solution long before you even knew the problem.

Think God has only done the bare minimum? How could the devil be so foolish to think we would believe that for a second. He's given his Son, given us heaven, given us access to him through prayer. Listens to your wants, your desires, your hurts, your griefs, and will see you through.

I look out and I see a lot of weakness. And while you and I may not be able to say, "That's great!" I am ready at least to say, "That's ok." God's grace will be sufficient for each of us. And, we get front row seats to see how his power is made perfect in our weaknesses, every single time.

When times are tough, when the struggles are real, may God bestow on us his grace to see his power at work in our lives, drawing us ever closer to him, until the day he brings us to his side, in Jesus' name, Amen!