

Grace Sufficient for Us
2 Corinthians 12:1-9
July 3, 2022

Tomorrow, we celebrate the 246th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. I thank God that although it was strictly an accident of birth, I was born in the United States. I'm both glad and thankful as we all are to be Americans.

"Benjamin Franklin was Ambassador to France for the newly independent United States of America; his quick wit and well-thought wisdom opened many doors for him and his new country. At one dinner in 1781 where the guest list included the powers of the day, the French Foreign Secretary began the dinner with a toast to King Louis, 'To his Majesty, King Louis, the sun, whose shining presence radiates the earth of France.' To which the British Ambassador rose with the toast: 'To King George the Third, the Moon, whose brilliance lights up the skies of Britain.' Then, with a twinkle in his eye, Benjamin Franklin rose slowly on his cane to say, 'I cannot give you the sun nor the moon, but I will give you General George Washington of the United States, the Joshua who made the sun and moon stand still.'" (1) This is a reference to the day recorded in the book of Joshua when the Israelites defeated the Amorites at Gibeon and the sun and moon stood still. (Joshua 10:10, 12) Benjamin Franklin knew his Bible. It was probably his primer as it was for so many boys and girls in Colonial America. My primer and probably for some of you also was the Dick and Jane book series with Sally, Dick, Jane, Tim, Puff, and Spot.

What we have recorded in our scripture is a bit of boasting on the part of Paul. Paul knew that when he needed to boast he should boast in the Lord. (1 Corinthians 1:31) Here he boasted about himself but only because he felt he had to. He admits however, that there is "nothing to be gained" by doing it. (2 Corinthians 12:1)

Paul goes on to talk about his visions and revelations in response to the boasting of intruders. It seems that there were teachers who had infiltrated the church at Corinth. They were making an impression on the congregation with their false claims of mystical experiences and visions which they had received directly from God. The congregation began to ask questions about the credibility of the "Apostle Paul. Paul had never spoken of any dramatic personal experiences, so was he really someone to look up to? ...And there may have been other leaders in Corinth who claimed that because of their own experiences they were better than Paul." (2)

Paul responded to these challenges by giving for the first time, an account of a man most certainly Paul himself, although he tries to take the spotlight off himself, who fourteen years earlier was caught up in the third heaven. What is the third heaven? It was understood as "a place beyond the immediate heaven of the earth's atmosphere and beyond the further heaven of outer space and its constellations into the presence of God himself." (3) He goes on to say that he does not know if it was in the body or out of the

body—only God knows and that he was caught up in paradise. Paradise is ‘synonymous with the third heaven where those believers who have died are even now ‘at home with the Lord.’” (4) Paul says he heard “inexpressible things, that no man is permitted to tell.” (2 Corinthians 12:4) This experience, because it was from God and not created by Paul, meant that Paul had no grounds for self-glorification.

In order to avoid getting confused we need to note that this is not a recounting of Paul’s conversion. It is something entirely different and previously unrevealed. This vision happened around 42 A.D., at least seven years after his conversion experience on the Damascus Road. This experience profoundly affected Paul who was caught up in the presence of God. Paul goes on to say that he would not boast about himself, “except about my weaknesses.” (2 Corinthians 12:5) Although he was justified in boasting because his experiences were true, he knew that boasting leads to feelings of spiritual superiority which in turn can lead to hard feelings in a congregation. It takes the focus off Jesus. He knew that if he was to boast it should be about the Lord.

A man was a guest speaker one Sunday at a small country church. He wanted to comb his hair and adjust his tie, but he could not find a mirror. He did, however, “find a glass-framed picture hanging on the wall, and by turning just right, he could see himself well enough in the reflection to comb his hair and re-do his tie. But then he noticed something. The picture behind the glass was one of Jesus. He either lost himself in the image of Christ or lost Christ when he concentrated on himself. He couldn’t see both at the same time. He was touched by the experience and never forgot it.” (5)

Paul could have easily boasted about all he had done for the Lord. Much of the mission and ministry that we read about in the New Testament letters center around him. Still Paul minimizes his opportunities to boast and turns instead to his weaknesses. He says: “To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a ‘thorn in the flesh.’” (2 Corinthians 12:7) We are not told what it is. Biblical scholars have tried to figure out what it was but Paul does not say. Whatever it was, Paul prayerfully pleaded to God to have it removed. Verse 8 reads, “Three times I pleaded with the Lord.” It was not removed and because of this Paul discovered that God could use his weaknesses as well as his strengths.

Over 40 years ago I took a course in pastoral care as a part of my seminary training. It was at Riverside Hospital in Columbus, Ohio. Visiting patients was not my thing. I had worked at this hospital a couple of years earlier but in the pharmacy department. I had been to visit my family members in hospitals many times but visiting strangers was new and terrifying especially in my new role as a representative for the Lord. I recall one afternoon visiting an older lady who seemed to have lost her will to live. Her room was dark and depressing. I don’t remember there being any flowers or cards. I was nervous and had a feeling in the pit of my stomach that I was woefully unprepared for this. I told her who I was and carried on a monologue with her. She did not respond. She had not been talking to

anyone, although I didn't know that at the time. We suffered through some long silences and finally I prayed a prayer that seemed to me to be wholly inadequate. When class met a week later, I made a return visit. I was shocked and amazed. There was light and brightness in her room and she was alert and responsive. I learned that others had mostly been avoiding her, but I had taken time with her. She thanked me for talking with her, for praying with her and helping her to turn the corner and get on with her life. I couldn't believe what had happened. It was amazing to me. God was in the midst of it all and I was taken aback by it all. It was by far the highlight of my experience in my pastoral class. It was an excellent example to me of a lesson I needed to learn—one Paul had learned: that God can use our weaknesses as well as our strengths.

Paul pleaded with the Lord to remove the thorn in his flesh and Jesus replied, "My grace is sufficient for you. My power is made perfect in weakness." (2 Corinthians 12:9) This is a better solution "than to remove Paul's thorn. Human weakness provides the ideal opportunity for the display of divine power." (6)

As I thought about a life that illustrates this truth most clearly, Joni Eareckson Tada came to mind. She was paralyzed from the neck down as a result of a diving accident at the age of seventeen. She spent many months in the hospital as an angry young woman. She was angry with God and with the world. After months of struggle, she finally gave control of her life over to the Lord. Although she cannot move except for her head, she has touched the lives of millions by her witness to the Lord God through her life, books, radio outreach, wheelchair ministry, movies, videos, painting, and so on. Because of her condition as a quadriplegic, she has had to rely solely on God's grace and strength. To add to her life's difficulties, she learned in 2010 at age 60 that she had breast cancer. As an update she's had breast cancer twice in 2010 and 2019 and Covid in 2020. As much as she shines as a bright light for the Lord, her life has not been easy. Paul shared the truth of the words he heard from the Lord Jesus "my power is made perfect in weakness." (2 Corinthians 2:9)

Joni spoke at the National Prayer Breakfast several years ago and had these encouraging words. "Trials are not just assaults to be withstood. Trials are opportunities to be seized." She continued: "Life becomes inspiring, not in spite of problems and hard hits, but because of them." (7)

"There was a ten-year-old boy who decided to study judo, despite the fact that he had lost his left arm in a devastating car accident. The boy began lessons with an old Japanese judo master. The boy was doing well, so he couldn't understand why, after three months of training, the master had taught him only one move. 'Master,' the boy finally said, 'shouldn't I be learning more moves?' 'I realize that this is the only move you know, but this may be the only move you will ever need to know,' the master replied. Not quite understanding, but believing his teacher, the boy kept training. Several months later, the master took the boy to his first tournament. Surprising himself, the boy easily won the first

two matches. The third match proved to be more difficult, but after some time, his opponent became impatient and charged. The boy deftly used his one move to win the match. Still amazed by his success, the boy made the finals. This time, his opponent was bigger, stronger, and more experienced. For a while, the boy appeared to be overmatched. Concerned that the boy might get hurt, the referee called time-out. He was about to stop the match when the master intervened. 'No' the master insisted. 'Let him continue.' As soon as the match was resumed, his opponent rushed in on him. Instantly, the boy used his move to pin him and won the match and the tournament. On the way home, he summoned the courage to ask, 'Master, how could I possibly have won the tournament with only one move?' The master turned to the boy and answered, 'You won for two reasons. First, you have been able to master the most difficult throw in all judo. And second, the only defense for that move that you have mastered is for your opponent to grab your left arm.' The boy's biggest weakness had become his biggest strength." (8)

I do not know all the trials in your lives, your family concerns, health issues, struggles with depression, and so on but I have to say as I enter my eighth year of ministry as your pastor, I have a much better understanding than I had at the beginning. I can also say that we all, including myself, have "a thorn in the flesh." "Thorns are any form of physical issues, hurts, hardships or hang-ups that God uses to remind us of our inadequacies and our weaknesses." (9) Paul was not unique. He used his thorn for ministry for the Lord. We have the same opportunity by relying on the grace of God to minister to those around us. Too often we are like the man looking at himself in the glass-framed picture of Jesus. Let us get our eyes off ourselves and focus on the Lord. Take his hand and walk daily with him in his all-sufficient grace. Let us, as Joni says, live inspired lives.

Amen.

(1) Dynamic Preaching July 1994 pg. 3

(2) Ibid. pg. 4

(3) NIV Study Bible p. 2304 "notes"

(4) Ibid. p. 2304 "notes"

(5) Dynamic Preaching, July 1994 pg. 5

(6) NIV Study Bible pg. 2305 "notes"

(7) Internet National Prayer Breakfast May 5, 2011-Speech

(8) Sermoncentral "From Thorns to Thankfulness"

Tim Smith March 17, 2011 p. 3

(9) Ibid. 2