

“Grace is Sufficient”

a sermon based on
2 Corinthians 12:2-10

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In his book, *Believe and Belong*, Bruce Larson wrote about how he used to help people struggling to surrender their lives to Jesus Christ. He worked in New York City. So when he had someone that just couldn't make that yes-or-no decision, he'd invite them for a walk. They'd leave his office and walk down to the RCA building on Fifth Avenue, and there he would point out this huge statue of Atlas in the entrance. They'd behold this perfectly proportioned strongman crouched down – with the world literally on his shoulders – struggling to lift it and barely able to do so. Then he'd say, "That's one way to live... trying to carry the world on your shoulders."

But then he'd take his companion across the street on the other side of Fifth Avenue to St. Patrick's Cathedral. In that cathedral is a shrine to the boy Jesus. And the image there is quite different. Instead of the well-proportioned strongman is the image of eight or nine year old boy just holding the world in one hand.¹

Two different images of strength – the struggling behemoth and the scrawny surprise.

But in our Scripture readings today, we sort of find two stories of weakness. Bear with me here, because this is going to sound strange - but we do have a story of a "weak" Jesus here. It's what the Scripture says, "And he could do no deed of power there..." (Mk. 6:5a) Hold that thought in the back of your mind. We're going to come back to it. That was the first story of weakness.

The second is Paul's. Paul who says, "I will boast all the more gladly in my weaknesses" (2 Cor. 12:9b) does so even though "a thorn was given to (him) in the flesh (not just any thorn) but a messenger of Satan to torment (him)" (2 Cor. 12:7b)

Allow me to share a little background here. This is from 2 Corinthians. By this time Paul's relationship with the Corinthian church had deteriorated from when he wrote 1 Corinthians. A big part of that was because some others had come to the church and were leading people away from the gospel of grace and holiness – to a religion of obligation and reward. One of the ways that they convinced people is by telling them about their fantastic spiritual experiences and visions. They must be holy! They've got it all together... sort of like the prosperity gospel preachers with their lavish jewelry, television sets, mansions and airplanes. God must be with them.

Paul, on the other hand, not so much. We don't have much of a description about him – but Joel Osteen he was not. Paul was bald or balding and not much to look at. Even more than that – he had this "thorn in his side." A lot of times people talk about what that affliction was. It's really all conjecture. Scripture doesn't tell us. But the Corinthians knew Paul, and his reference to that thorn so nonchalant that I suspect they knew what it was.

Who is he to tell us that we're getting it wrong? Look at the mess his life is? That thorn wasn't just any old ache or pain. Paul says as much when he calls it "a messenger from Satan." (2 Cor. 12: 7b). If this guy was so in tune with God Almighty, you'd think that he wouldn't have had to ask three times to have it taken away... And yet it still persists.

Part of our problem with this whole "thorn in the side" thing is how we translate the Greek. The Greek word *σκολοψ* (*skolops*) can mean a "thorn" like we think of it. But it could also refer to the pointed spikes that form a rampart in battle. Paul is facing spiritual warfare.

The irony is that the church acts as if that undercuts his spiritual authority over those others who've got it all together.

You ever feel like that? You ever feel like everyone else has got it so together? Not just in church, but in the rest of life? Bob just got a new Lexus. Janis and John just got back from Hawaii. Wow. And I'm wondering how I'm going to manage pay for junior's college when I'm still paying off my student loans. I'm wondering whether I'll get to retire before the undertaker hauls me away.

Maybe it's something simpler: the friend who brags about the daughter who's first in her class and the captain of the cheerleading squad, the co-worker who brags about his newest accomplishment and how much it impressed the boss.

In all of those things we don't always know the rest of the story. Like Atlas everyone else seems to have the strength, the character, the skills to excel more than me.

As a pastor, I see it in church each time someone declines an invitation to lead a group – a gathering – in prayer. “I just can't. I'm not good at that.” But at the same time elevating those who may seem more articulate. But what's really going on?

And then... there's all this temptation. If I really did have it together, shouldn't it get easier? You'd think so; but no. Satan throws more obstacles at us whenever we are living in God's favor. This is what Paul is bragging about.

Paul says, “You want me to brag about visions and how together I am. I could do that. I was lifted up to the third heaven. Did any of those others who have it all together?” But even then, he couches the brag – speaking of “one”- of himself - in the third person. Instead, he says, “You know what I'm going to brag about. I'm going to brag that even though, I've had this thorn in my side – God has still used me to proclaim the Gospel. God has exerted his healing touch through my hands, even though Satan is tormenting me. Even though I'd rather that torment be removed, I can see it for what it is. It keeps me faithful – because I know I couldn't do a darn thing except by God's grace. In fact, Satan's torment is even a bit of a compliment – if he thinks my faith is such a threat.” Paul boasted in his “weakness” because it revealed that God had power to use him.

Ironically, Jesus' weakness – his inability to do any works of power – in his hometown wasn't because Jesus was weak. It was because people looked at that hometown boy as Joseph and Mary's son – not the Son of God – and they wouldn't have got it. They would have taken pride in the hometown boy made good and thought that he had it all together because he was from there, instead of because God's power and love was manifest in him.

Here's the thing. This same God who used ugly Paul to spread the Gospel throughout the Roman Empire – this same God who worked wonders through Paul despite his failings and despite his early hatred for the church and Jesus Christ – this same God – through his grace in Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit can work wonders in you.

His grace is sufficient. Philippians 4:13 says, “I can do all things through him who strengthens me.” God doesn't wait for you to have it all together to use you – to bless others – to bless the world through you. God doesn't need you to be perfect (He'd like it; but he doesn't need it.) because he is perfect.

I can't remember the movie, but there's an old western in which a medicine man comes to town selling tonic. There's a strong man there with him who lifts up this huge weight, and then he invites a feeble old man in the crowd to step up and try the tonic. All of a sudden he lifts up that same weight with which the strongman struggled. Then he sells out all of his tonic.

Why was that? Because the crowd “knew” that that feeble old man couldn’t lift up such a heavy weight on his own, so they attributed it to the tonic.

Snake oil is a scam. But the power of God isn’t. Don’t allow your own insecurity inhibit the wonders that God will work through you because they will reveal the power of Christ. Don’t even try to carry the world on your own shoulders. Don’t think that you need a spiritual body like Atlas’ physique for God to use you, because Jesus has the whole world in his hand. His grace is sufficient.

AMEN

¹ Larson, Craig Brian, ed., *Illustrations from Preaching & Teaching from Leadership Journal* (Baker Books: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1993) 252.