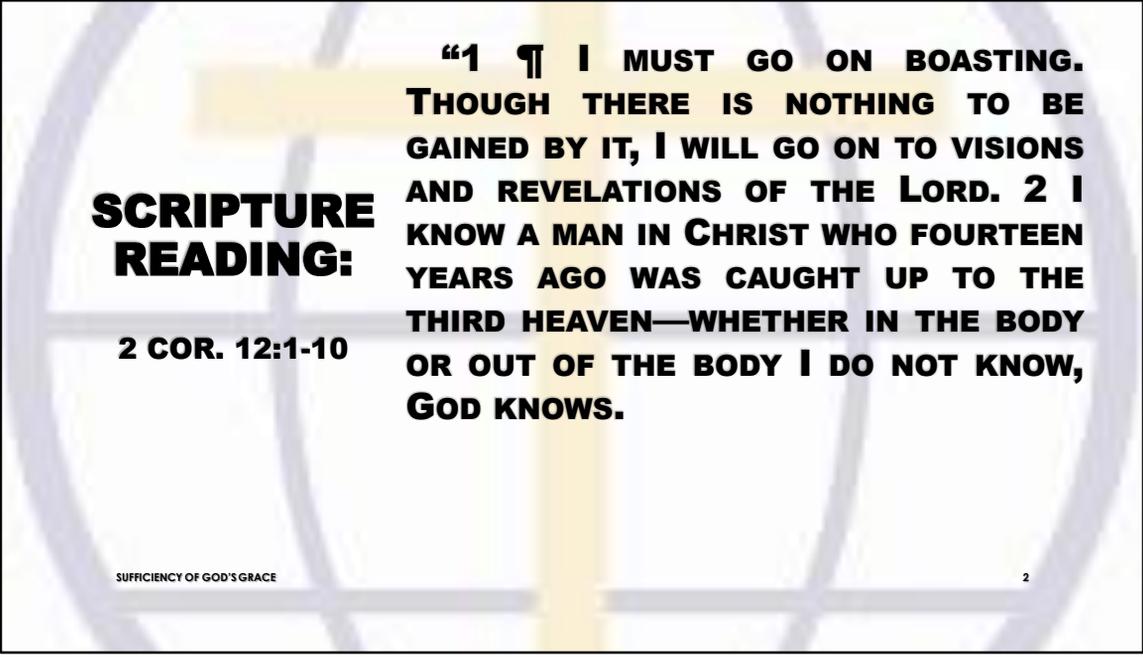


SUFFICIENCY OF GOD'S GRACE

Grace Communion International
Minister: Eric Vautour
Date: July 8, 2018

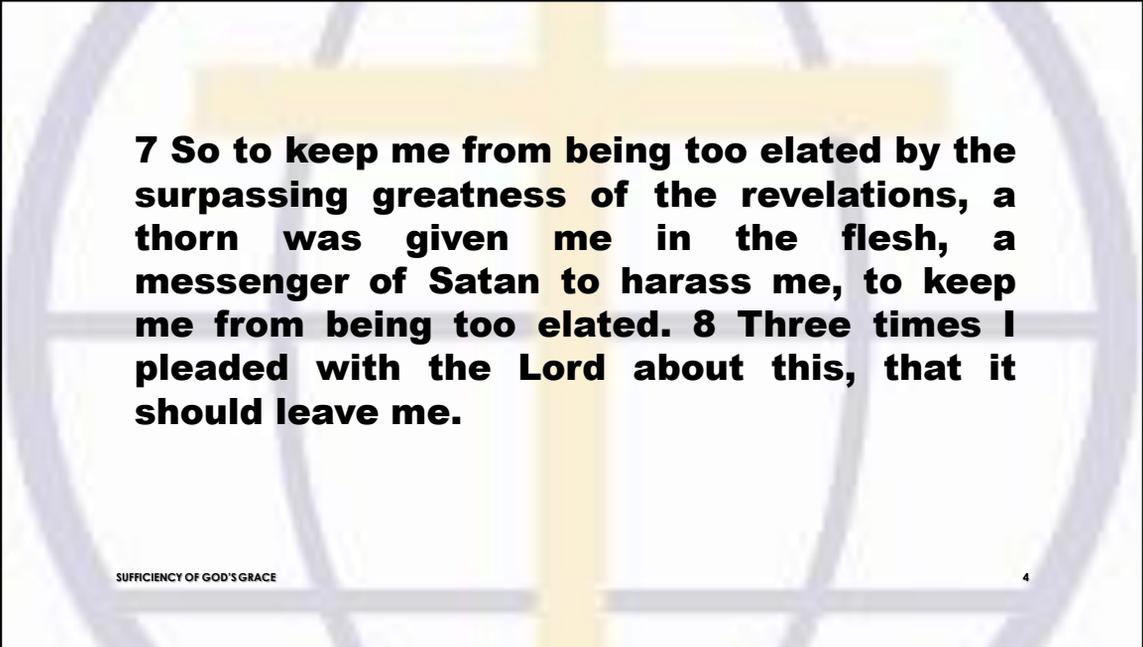


**SCRIPTURE
READING:**

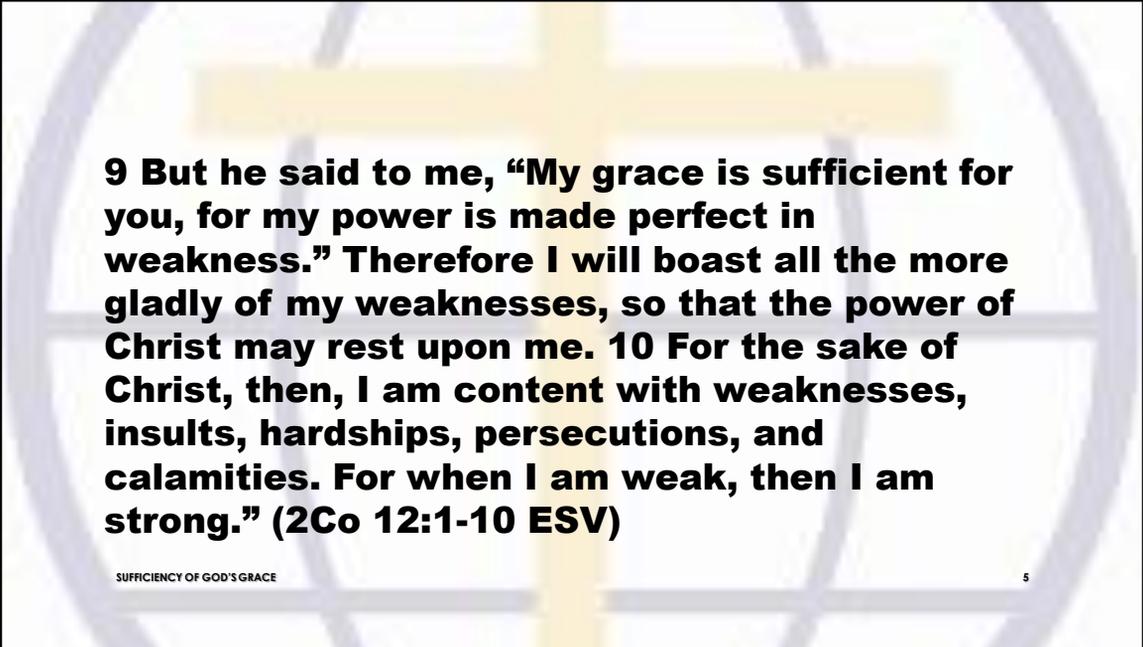
2 COR. 12:1-10

“1 ¶ I MUST GO ON BOASTING. THOUGH THERE IS NOTHING TO BE GAINED BY IT, I WILL GO ON TO VISIONS AND REVELATIONS OF THE LORD. 2 I KNOW A MAN IN CHRIST WHO FOURTEEN YEARS AGO WAS CAUGHT UP TO THE THIRD HEAVEN—WHETHER IN THE BODY OR OUT OF THE BODY I DO NOT KNOW, GOD KNOWS.

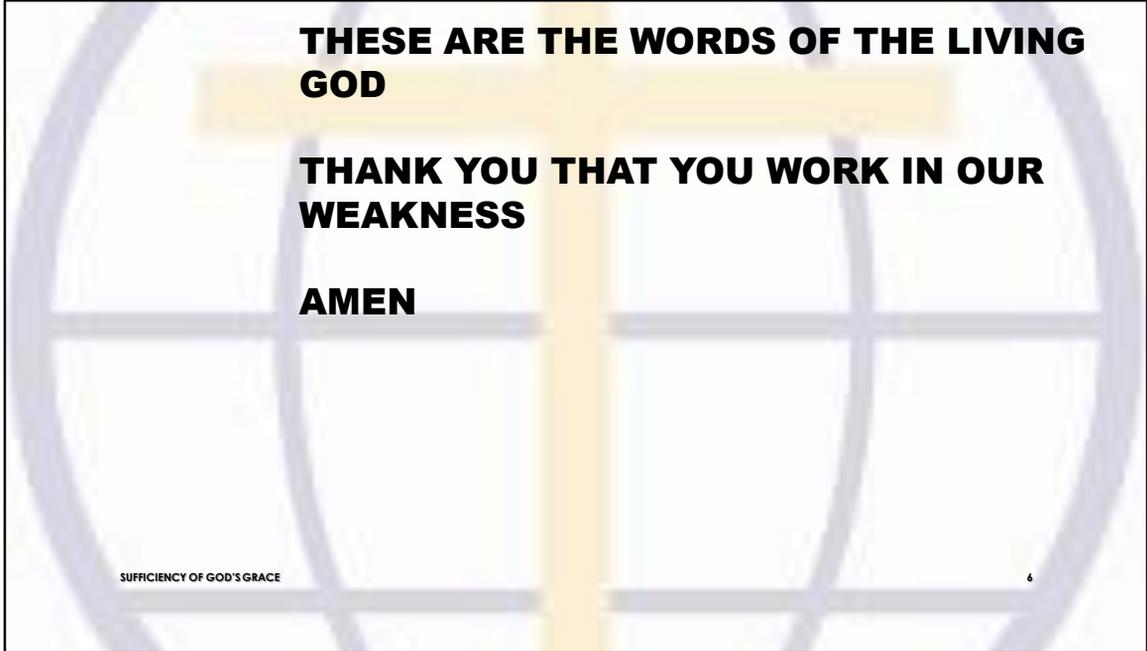
3 AND I KNOW THAT THIS MAN WAS CAUGHT UP INTO PARADISE—WHETHER IN THE BODY OR OUT OF THE BODY I DO NOT KNOW, GOD KNOWS— 4 AND HE HEARD THINGS THAT CANNOT BE TOLD, WHICH MAN MAY NOT UTTER. 5 ON BEHALF OF THIS MAN I WILL BOAST, BUT ON MY OWN BEHALF I WILL NOT BOAST, EXCEPT OF MY WEAKNESSES. 6 THOUGH IF I SHOULD WISH TO BOAST, I WOULD NOT BE A FOOL, FOR I WOULD BE SPEAKING THE TRUTH. BUT I REFRAIN FROM IT, SO THAT NO ONE MAY THINK MORE OF ME THAN HE SEES IN ME OR HEARS FROM ME.



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. 8 Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me.



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 weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. 10 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.” (2Co 12:1-10 ESV)



As we think about Paul's reliance and sufficiency of God's grace, let consider some of the things we know about the former life of the apostle Paul.

- He was a devotee to the law and he lived by the law thinking that he was doing God's work;
- Prior to his conversion, he put innocent people in jail.
- He attacked them because they believed in the person of Jesus, the eternal Son of God as the source of their hope in eternal life. They trusted in Jesus finished work on the cross and in his resurrection for eternal life rather than trusting in their own doing to earn it.
- He was brutal. He conspired to kill to force them to recant Christ.
- When he was called, he accepted Jesus' forgiveness of all his sins. Rather than trusting in his zeal, he repented and trusted in Jesus' and received the gift of a new life united to Jesus.

As we read his epistles, the focus is not on the tragedy of his past life but a rather, he focused on the essential of the gospel. **"3 For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, 4 that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures," (1 Co 15:3-4 ESV)**

- He did not reminisce on his past life and how terrible it was. Rather he trusted in

the sufficiency of God's grace.

Malcolm Muggeridge, who lived from March 24, 1903, to November 1990. He was an agnostic most of his life. He was converted to Christianity much later in life. In his book, **CHRIST IN THE MEDIA** wrote the following when asked, "Mr. Muggeridge, *you've obviously been spending some time cogitating on your life, and I'm wondering if, if you had the opportunity, you would live it over again the same, and if not, what would you change?*

The following is part of his answer, *Theoretically, one ought to be able to say: "all the awful things I've done, I wish I hadn't done". But actually it wouldn't be true. I've been writing my autobiography, and this forces you to examine your life with some closeness. As I proceeded with this examination, I've come to see my life, in its tiny way, as part of the whole drama of creation, enacted by creatures made in the image of God, living in time, capable of conceiving perfection but by nature imperfect. If, therefore, I were to say that I wish I hadn't done this or that, it would amount to wishing that my life, in its totality, had been other than it has been, and that I hadn't been vouchsafed (given, allowed) such glimpses of truth through living it and that I been vouchsafed (given, allowed)... When we offer our lives to God it is in their totality, not revised for his inspection. I shudder to think it must be so, but so it is.*

All of us have been called because we were sinners now made saints by Jesus. God, through the Holy Spirit, has taken our life for what it is and is refashioning it the perfect likeness of the man Jesus, preparing us to participate in the loving relationship of the triune God for all eternity. Let us see what we can learn from Paul's attitude towards his life and towards God.

As we saw in our Epistle readings today, serving Christ often involves suffering. In 2 Corinthians 12, we find the apostle Paul suffering the ignominy of false charges leveled by his opponents within the church at Corinth. Chief among them are the Judaizers—false teachers who are tearing Paul down in order to promote themselves. In chapter 11, Paul counters their false claims by recounting his sufferings to serve Christ—a qualification the Judaizers cannot claim.

In 2 Cor. 11:30, the apostle Paul says, *"I will boast of the things that show my weakness.*

Now in chapter 12, Paul adds to his defense the record of three personal experiences with Jesus. Through his third-person account (a common rabbinic teaching device) we learn a great deal about Paul's passionate devotion to Jesus, despite the sufferings he endured. There is much encouragement here for Christians who suffer in serving

Christ.



Though the Judaizers boasted of their “letters of recommendation” ([2 Cor. 3:1](#)), Paul looked to God, not people, for his commendation.

Paul notes how God honored him early in his ministry with a special vision of God’s glory. Paul had experienced other visions given to instruct and encourage him in his ministry, but this one was so vivid, he is not sure if it was a vision at all. Perhaps it happened to him bodily.

In any case, this marvelous experience took place about 14 years prior to writing this letter. Paul was transported to the third heaven (“paradise”) where God manifests his presence to angels and humans.

Perhaps what is most interesting is that Paul kept quiet about that experience for 14 years! During that time span, he was buffeted by what he calls a “thorn in the flesh” ([2 Cor. 12:7](#)).

Perhaps people wondered why this esteemed apostle had such a burdensome affliction. The Judaizers may have adopted the views of Job’s “comforters” and said, **“This affliction is a punishment from God,”** though, actually, it was God’s gift to Paul!

Some of Paul's friends may have tried to encourage him by saying, "**Cheer up, Paul. One day you'll be in heaven!**," to which Paul might have replied, "**That's why I have this thorn—I went to heaven!**"

God also honored Paul by permitting him in paradise to hear "inexpressible things" ([2 Cor. 12:4](#)). Perhaps God shared with him certain divine secrets.

Could the Judaizers relate any such experiences? This vision was one of the sustaining powers in Paul's life and ministry. No matter where he was—in prison, shipwrecked in the ocean, in dangerous travels, suffering illness—he knew God was with him and that all was well.

Though the full glory of heaven lies yet ahead for all of us, we can be encouraged knowing that today we are seated already with Jesus in the "heavenly realms" ("**and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus,**" [Eph 2:6 ESV](#)). United to him, we have a position of authority and victory, in and with him, that is "far above all" ("**21 in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. 22 In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.**" [Eph 2:21-22 ESV](#)).

While we have not yet seen the fullness of God's glory as Paul did, we experience that glory now, and one day we will enter into its fullness through bodily resurrection into a new heaven and earth where we will behold face-to-face the glory we now share with Jesus.

Such an honor as Paul experienced through this event would make most people big-headed. Yet, Paul remained humble. How? Because of the second experience that God gave him—one that granted him *the gift of humility*...



God knows how to bring balance to our lives and character. Were he to grant us only blessings, we'd likely become vain and self-assured; so he permits burdens as well.

Paul's great experience in heaven could have ruined his ministry on earth; so God, in his wisdom and goodness, permitted Satan to buffet Paul to keep him from becoming filled with pride.

The mystery of human suffering will not be solved completely in this life.

Sometimes we suffer simply because we are human. The same body that can bring us pleasure can also bring us pain. The same family members and friends that delight us can also break our hearts. This is part of the human condition, and the only way to escape it is to be less than human. But nobody wants to take that route.

Sometimes we suffer because we are foolish and disobedient to God. Our own rebellion may afflict us, or the Lord may see fit to discipline us in his love. In his grace, God forgives our sins; but he still often permits us to reap what we have sown.

Suffering also is a tool God uses for building in us the character of Christ. Paul came

to maturity in Christ, largely because he permitted God to mold him through the painful experiences of life, including his “thorn in the flesh,” which God gave Paul to keep him from the sin of pride. Exciting spiritual experiences—like going to heaven and back—have a way of inflating the ego; and pride is a sin that opens the door to many other sins.

We don’t know what Paul’s thorn in the flesh was. It was apparently a physical affliction of some kind that brought him pain and distress. Some Bible students, based on [Galatians 6:11](#), think Paul had an eye affliction, but we don’t know for sure. What we can know is that no matter what our sufferings may be, we are able to apply the lessons Paul learned and get encouragement.

God permitted Satan to afflict Paul, just as he permitted Satan to afflict Job. While we do not fully understand the origin of evil, or all the purposes God had in mind when he permitted evil to come, we do know that God controls evil and can use it for his own glory.

We also know that Satan cannot work against a believer without God’s permission, and Satan was permitted to “torment” Paul. The tense of the verb in Greek indicates that his pain was either constant or recurring. When you stop to think that Paul had letters to write, trips to take, sermons to preach, churches to visit, and dangers to face as he ministered, you can understand that this was a serious matter. No wonder he prayed three times that his affliction might be removed.

When God permits suffering to come into our lives, there are several ways we can deal with it.

Some people become bitter and blame God for robbing them of freedom and pleasure.

Others give up and fail to get any blessing out of the experience.

Still others grit their teeth and put on a brave front, determined to “endure to the very end.” While this is a courageous response, it usually drains them of the strength needed for daily living, and after a time, they may collapse.

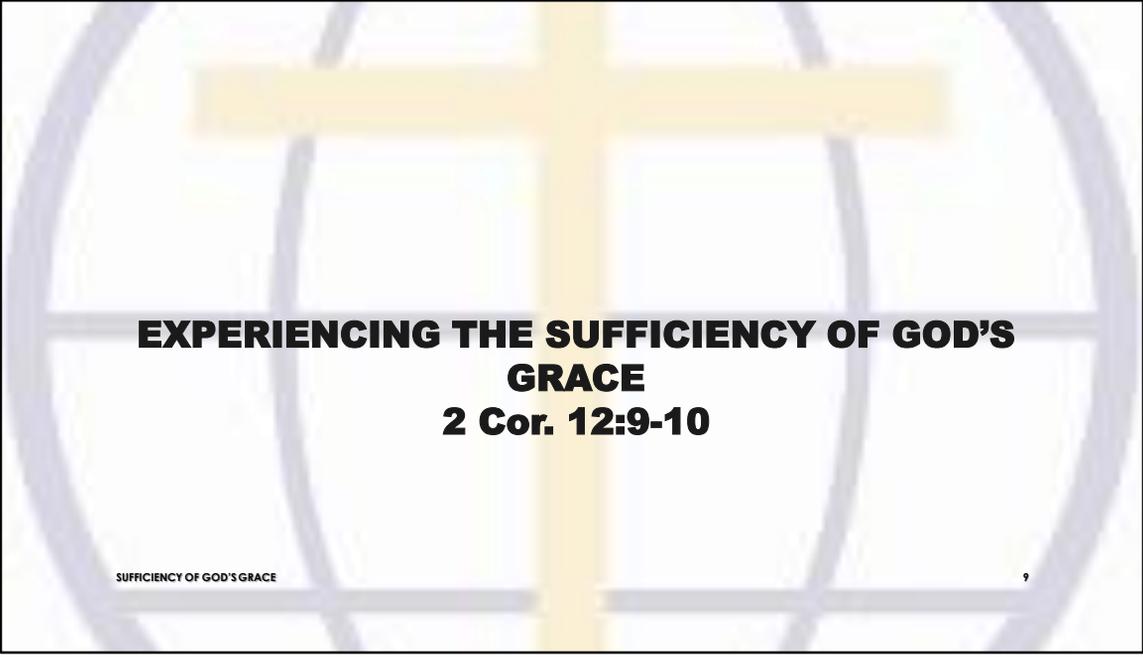
It’s normal that a Christian, like Paul did, would ask God for deliverance from sickness and pain. Though God has not obligated himself to heal every believer whenever they pray, he has encouraged us to bring all our burdens and needs to him. Paul did not know whether this “thorn in the flesh” was a temporary testing from God or a permanent experience he would have to learn to live with.

Some want us to believe that an afflicted Christian is a disgrace to God. "If you are obeying the Lord and claiming all that you have in Christ," they say, "then you will never be sick." This health and wealth teaching, sometimes called "the prosperity gospel," is not biblical.

It is true that God promised the Jews special blessing and protection under the old covenant, but he has never promised new covenant believers freedom from sickness or suffering. If Paul had access to instant healing because of his relationship to Christ, why didn't he make use of it for himself and for others?

What a contrast between Paul's two experiences! **Paul went from paradise to pain.** He tasted the blessing of God in heaven, then felt the buffeting of Satan on earth, yet the two experiences belong together. His one experience of glory prepared him for the constant experience of suffering, for he knew that God was able to meet his every need.

Paul had gone to heaven, but then he learned that heaven could come to him.



**EXPERIENCING THE SUFFICIENCY OF GOD'S
GRACE
2 Cor. 12:9-10**

SUFFICIENCY OF GOD'S GRACE

9

The thorn in the flesh was Satan's message to Paul, but God had another message for him in his suffering: **a message about grace.**

The tense of the Greek verb in v. 9 is important. It could read: **"But he [God] has once-for-all said to me."** God gave Paul a message that stayed with him. The words Paul heard while in heaven, he is not permitted to share. **But he does share the words God gave him on earth—and what an encouragement they were to him, and to us.**

This is God's message of grace. And what is grace? It is God's provision for our every need when we need it. **It has been said that God in his grace gives us what we do not deserve, and in his mercy he does not give us what we do deserve.** The apostle John put it this way: **"From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another" (John 1:16).** God's message to Paul was of both **sufficient grace** and **strengthening grace**:

Sufficient grace. There is never a shortage of grace with God. His grace is sufficient for our ministries, our material needs, and our physical needs. If God's grace is sufficient to save us (and it is), surely it is sufficient to keep us and strengthen us in

our times of struggle and suffering.

Strengthening grace. God permits us to become weak so that we might receive and rely upon his strength. This is a continuous process: **“My power is [being] made perfect in [your] weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9)** is how Paul put it. Strength that knows itself to be strength is actually weakness (because it “knows” something that isn’t true), but weakness that knows itself to be weakness is actually strength.

When Paul prayed three times for the removal of his thorn in his flesh, he was asking God for substitution: **“God, give me health instead of sickness, deliverance instead of pain and weakness.”**

But often God does not meet our need with substitution—instead, as was the case for Paul, he meets our need with transformation. Rather than removing the affliction, he gives us his sufficient and strengthening grace so that the affliction works for us, not against us.

Through prayer, Paul learned that his thorn in his flesh was a gift from God. There was only one thing for Paul to do: accept it as from God and thus allow God to accomplish his purposes. God wanted to keep Paul from “becoming conceited” **“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.” (2Co 12:7 ESV)** and this was his way to do that.

With Paul’s acceptance came an open door in his heart for God’s grace to do its transforming work in his life.

It also gave him an open ear to hear God’s promise: **“P a u l , m y g r a c e i s s u f f i c i e n t f o r y o u . ”** We are reminded that as Christ-followers we walk by faith—confidence in God’s promises to us—not confidence in detailed instructions or lengthy explanations. Reliance on God’s promises generates faith, and faith strengthens hope for the journey.

So Paul heard God’s word to him and drew on the grace that God promised. This transformed in his heart a seeming tragedy into great triumph. Indeed, God does “give more grace,” as James wrote (**“But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.”” (Jas 4:6 ESV)**).

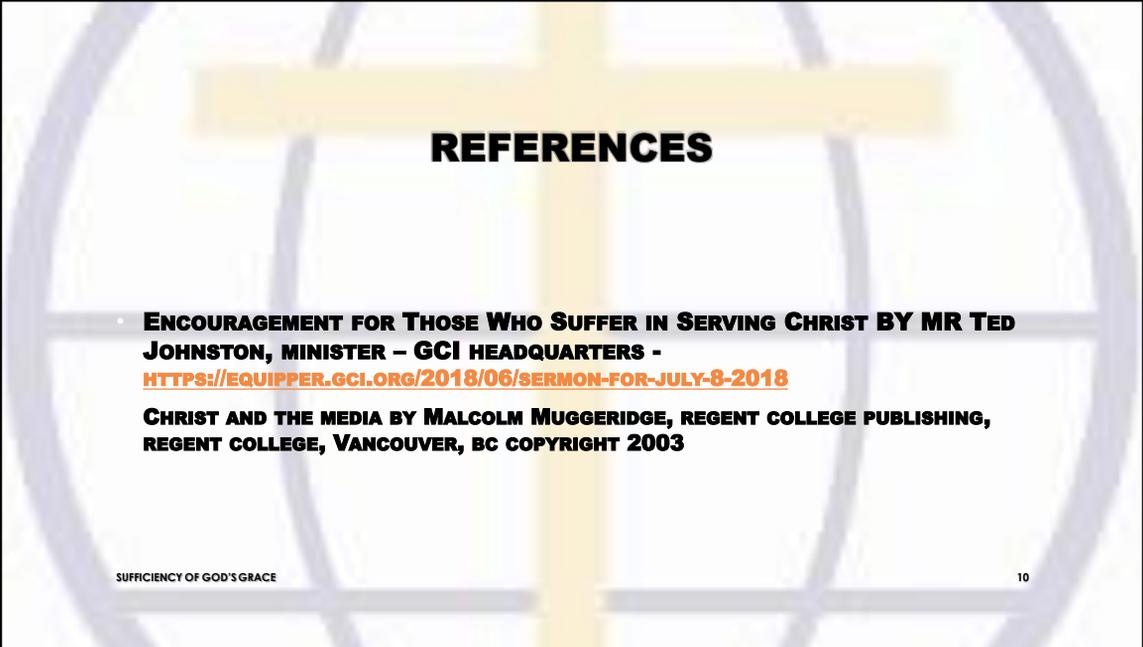
No matter how we look at it, God’s grace is sufficient for our every need. But understand that God’s grace is not given so we would merely endure suffering. **God’s grace enables us to rise above our circumstances and feelings so that our afflictions produce positive good.**

Above all, our trials are used by God to conform us to the likeness of Jesus. God transformed Paul's weakness into strength. The word translated *rest* in [2 Cor. 12:9](#) means **"to spread a tent over."** Paul saw his body as a frail tent ([2 Cor 5:1 ff](#)), **but the glory of God came into that tent and transformed it into a holy tabernacle despite the physical infirmity Paul endured.**

Thus Paul was able to glory in his infirmities. This does not mean that he preferred pain to health, **but rather that he allowed God to turn his infirmities into assets.** Paul was thus able to "delight" in his trials, not because he was psychologically unbalanced and enjoyed pain, but because he was suffering to serve Jesus and, in that suffering was experiencing the sufficiency of God's grace.

From Paul's experiences with Jesus in the midst of suffering, we learn a great deal about God and ourselves as people called to God's service. We serve him through many difficulties, but always with a vision of his glory, tempered by a humble appraisal of ourselves. In that way, we look to and trust in God alone. With Paul, we know that God's grace is sufficient.

Thank you, Jesus. Our sufficiency is in you. *Amen.*



REFERENCES

- **ENCOURAGEMENT FOR THOSE WHO SUFFER IN SERVING CHRIST BY MR TED JOHNSTON, MINISTER – GCI HEADQUARTERS -**

[HTTPS://EQUIPPER.GCI.ORG/2018/06/SERMON-FOR-JULY-8-2018](https://equipper.gci.org/2018/06/sermon-for-july-8-2018)

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