

# My Grace is Sufficient

## 2 Corinthians 12:2-10

*The LCA provides this sermon outline for lay-reading, with thanks to the original author, Pastor Andrew Brook.*

In preparing for this address, I searched the LCA Worship Resources, and saw this sermon based on the epistle for today and written many years back by Pastor Andrew Brook, our most recent Senior Pastor. It is a timely word for us here at St Paul's, as once again we rejoice in the Lord's rich provision for our St Paul's congregation.

Consider:

- His provision of physical resources way beyond our imaginings (a multimillion dollar sale, relocation and building process!)
- Faithful and capable lay "servant leadership" during this lengthy vacancy of a Senior Pastor, and especially now with Pastor Aldi on long service leave
- The provision of a wonderfully gifted team of paid staff (the largest of any congregation in the LCA!)
- The rich and varied worship life we enjoy, enhanced with musical gifts of choirs, organists, instrumental ensembles and bands, (even an occasional didgeridoo), and the many singers (young and older) who lead us!

It would be understandably easy for us to feel a little proud, even strong, as a congregation.

St Paul's has every reason to be proud of these great achievements, these blessings.

Reflecting on this, we may well ask, what is it that the Lord looks for in us? What strengths, what resources does He require or even need?

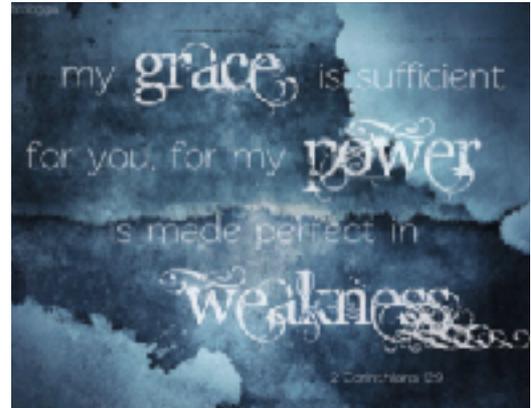
Humility has been defined as 'being so interested in others, you don't think about yourself at all'.

St Paul, this time the writer of our epistle reading for today, had every reason to be proud of his great achievements. He was the most successful missionary in the New Testament church. He treasured the Gospel of God's grace so much that he worked tirelessly to tell others about it. What's more, he was blessed with an extraordinary vision of heaven, which could have made him very prideful.

Instead, Paul fears his converts to Christianity will think more highly of him than they do of God's grace. He wants his fellow-Christians to focus their attention on all that our Lord Jesus has done for them, rather than on him and his missionary activities. We find those who constantly brag about the wonderful things they've done to be off-putting. We feel closer and more able to relate to those who admit their flaws and imperfections. People who recognise their flaws of one kind or another, are also often more sympathetic to others.

You see, as far as God is concerned, we are all of equal worth with each other in our weaknesses. We all kneel together at the foot of the cross. It is our weaknesses that make us alike; it is our strengths that make us different. Acknowledging our weaknesses links us to others in ways that are compassionate and caring.

Listen again to last part of our Epistle reading, where Paul, after pleading with God to remove his thorn, says, “and the Lord said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness’. So, I will boast even more gladly in my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me...”



The grace of Christ our Saviour has enabled many of His people to do great things for Him despite their weaknesses:

- William Wilberforce’s physical frailty didn’t stop him from working successfully for the abolition of slavery.
- Charles Spurgeon was one of London’s most powerful and effective preachers ever. He did his best work while an invalid.
- George Matheson wrote his famous, comforting and consoling hymn ‘O Love that will not let me go’ after experiencing a broken heart and suffering from his own “thorn in the flesh” which was blindness.

If you read the biographies of famous Christians, you learn of how they persisted in prayer despite not having some of their most passionate requests granted. They testify to the fact that regular prayer brings endless blessings, which only makes the question of unanswered prayer all the more acute. Many of their other requests were answered in astonishing ways, for which they were forever grateful.

Unanswered prayer only becomes a burning issue when my whole life depends on it. “The greatest tragedy of life is not unanswered prayer, but unoffered prayer” (J.B. Meyer). Any prayer is better than no prayer at all. The psalms teach us the importance of frankness in prayer. Prayers that are expressions of anger and disappointment at least show that we have taken God seriously and hold nothing back from Him. A major failure regarding prayer is to stop praying too soon for something. Instead, many have discovered how their disappointments and failures have led them to pray with deeper passion and greater blessings.

And then there are the times where we can’t find the words, we are empty of energy and simply cry out... I am reminded of the words of Johann von Staupitz, Martin Luther’s Spiritual Father, confessor and guide, who, in the midst of Luther’s turmoil and wrestling with doubts and fears, simply urges the exhausted Martin to hold the cross and pray, “Lord, I am yours, save me!” over and over again... It is a great and comforting scene in the Luther movie! Many of us also use prayer crosses from time to time.

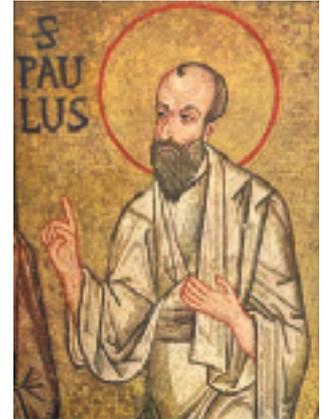
There are also times when words don’t come... we groan in pain, grief, despair... and as Paul also reminds us in Romans 8, “the Spirit helps us in our weakness, interceding for us in groans too deep for words”. Grace in our weakness!

Persistence in prayer encourages growth in prayer, especially prayers for others. Jesus doesn’t explain unanswered prayer. He Himself experienced it in the garden of Gethsemane when His

threefold request to not have to suffer and die was unanswered. Instead, an angel came to strengthen Jesus for the terrible time ahead. But from that unanswered prayer, we have received the salvation Jesus has won for us at such a great cost.

The point of prayer is, after all, maintaining our relationship with God, rather than the things we get from that relationship. We can probably all think of selfish prayer requests that, in hindsight, we are glad went unanswered. To rise from prayer with a renewed and strengthened faith in our Lord Jesus is to have the best result from prayer imaginable. To pray “Your will be done” is a cry of commitment to our God whose will is infinitely wiser than our own. Prayer can involve asking to be changed by God in ways pleasing to Him, wonderful ways that we never thought of.

In order that St Paul didn't think too highly of his own visions and accomplishments, he was given a “thorn in the flesh”. It's good that we don't know for sure what it was, so that we can identify with Paul, having also our own “thorn in the flesh”, whatever it may be. Some Biblical scholars believe that Paul's “thorn” was most likely those people in the church in Corinth who were impossible to please. Paul could never “rest on his laurels” and contemplate a trouble-free church. There was always pastoral repair work to be done. Furthermore, Paul wants us to see that any vision of heaven he was given meant less to him than Christ and the life-changing power of His grace.



Paul suffered many hardships and tough times in his ministry. Only one thing got Paul down. He felt the “thorn” he was given undermined the effectiveness of his ministry. He begged Jesus to remove this humiliating burden. Our Lord's reply to Paul has been an unending source of comfort to us Christians ever since. The centre of Jesus' reply is all about the power of His grace. Jesus says, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness (v9).” Behind the success of any servant of God is the powerful grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus is, in effect, saying to Paul, “I'll do something better than remove your thorn. I will give you the grace to bear it creatively and be all the more effective because of My grace at work in you.”

Paul now comes to terms with his nagging “thorn” because of the wonderful way it enables him to experience the transforming power of Christ's grace. In Romans 7 Paul writes, “Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from the body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” Here Paul is ‘wearing his heart on his sleeve’ and telling us that he too experiences weaknesses with us.

The grace of Christ can minister to us and help us in even the most trying circumstances of daily life. Your thorn and my thorn won't be the same as St Paul's, but God's grace can make them just as fruitful in our work for Him. Paul concludes, “Therefore I will boast all the most gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

Here in our St Paul's faith community, we too experience weakness and woundedness. We suffer loss, live with grief and suffering, some suffer physical pain, others doubt, even despair, some grapple with depression, there is family and



relationship breakdown, and there is death...

And ... we continue to pray – for each other, for ourselves, and for a hurting world in need of God's grace!

God enables us to live grace imbued lives, despite our imperfections and our woundedness.



Here at St Paul's we declare, **In Christ, we Gather, Grow and Go!**

God has no way of touching suffering humanity with His love except through His servants, including you and me, and this St Pauls' community, who, held in His grace, are engaged with, and identifying with humanity's weakness.

Our Saviour Jesus is most active in imperfect Christians who cannot live a day without him and the companionship that's ours through prayer. What a priceless and indispensable blessing this grace is.

Be encouraged again by Jesus' words to us: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power has its most perfect manifestation in your weakness."

Amen.

And may the peace of God, which passes all human understanding, keep our hearts and minds fixed in Christ Jesus, our Lord and Saviour. Amen.

