

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, July 4, 2021
“Sufficient Grace” (2 Corinthians 2-10)

I believe that God hears every prayer that is lifted up to him. And I believe that God answers every prayer, but sometimes the answer is no. In our reading from 2 Corinthians, the Apostle Paul relates how God said no to him.

Paul writes that he had a thorn in the flesh. Now, we don't know exactly what that was, but many believe it was a physical ailment of some kind: epilepsy, malaria, poor eyesight, or chronic arthritis. Others think it may have been some inner longing or anxiety, much like the *anfechtung* (inner turmoil) Martin Luther felt. Still others speculate that it was an antagonistic opponent who was the thorn in his side.

We simply don't know what plagued Paul, but we do know that he wanted to be rid of it. And if anyone ever deserved to be healed or freed of his woe, it was Paul. As the chief missionary to the early church, he was the second most influential person who ever lived. Paul had important work to do for the Lord: preaching the gospel and planting churches throughout the known world. No doubt, his work would have been easier if he didn't have this thorn in the flesh, distracting him and slowing him down. Paul prayed that God would take it away. Three times he prayed, but each time God said no.

God is like that sometimes. And sometimes it happens to us. We go through difficult times where we hurt, or struggle, or grieve. There's a thorn in our flesh. Maybe our thorn is physical: constant pain, a debilitating illness, or a disease. Maybe our thorn is relational: a problem we're having with our parent, child, spouse, or other family member. Maybe it's our job or a project to which we have committed, one we find boring, unrewarding, or one in which we feel undervalued and underappreciated. And so, bearing that thorn, we pray. We pray for comfort, for strength, for healing. Because we want things to be better – long for things to be better – we turn to God, believing that he is able to take away our trouble. And God *is* able. God *does* have the power to take it away, but sometimes God says no.

However, *no* is not God's only word to us. Paul understood – as we do – that life does not always go the way we plan. But he also knew that there is hope for the sufferer and that, with God's help, we can deal with any thorn, obstacle, or heartache that might come our way.

Paul tells us that God answered his prayer by saying, *My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness*. There is power in weakness because, often times, it is only through suffering that God's grace is made clear. It is those times when we're at the end of our ropes that we recognize God's grace and discover that his grace is enough.

Now, this is not to say that God sends pain and suffering. We need to understand that. If we are going through a difficult time right now, it is not because God is punishing us for some reason or trying to send us a message. Notice that Paul calls his thorn in the flesh *a messenger from Satan*. It didn't come from God. God was not using this to get Paul's attention. However, God could use Paul's pain and suffering to make him a stronger man, a man of even greater faith.

And Paul had to be strong. Consider all the miles he put on his sandals for the sake of the gospel. Consider all the difficulties he mentions in this text: insults, hardships, persecutions and calamities. All this, not to mention what we read from his other letters: how he received 39 lashes from his own people, how he was beaten with rods, stoned, shipwrecked, and imprisoned on several occasions. We know that he experienced hunger, thirst, nakedness, sleepless nights, and much hostility and resistance from doubters, critics, and those who preached a different gospel.

He had to have been a strong man to endure all this and still reach so many people with the good news of Jesus Christ. Paul understood that there was power in his weakness; that he was able to endure and accomplish all he did – not by his own strength – but by the grace of God. Sometimes, we too, need to be reminded that God’s grace is enough. So God says no.

Paul also experienced something *other-worldly*. At the beginning of this passage, he describes a man who, 14 years earlier, had been caught up to the third heaven, or Paradise. Scholars believe that Paul is referring to himself. Although Paul is not sure if he went there in body or only through a vision, he saw and heard things too sacred to repeat.

Because of that holy experience, Paul had much reason to boast – especially to the Corinthians, some who questioned Paul’s authority based on their own ecstatic experiences. Because of the wonderful things he saw, Paul could have out-bragged anyone and perhaps he was tempted to. But he writes that this thorn in his flesh was to keep him from getting too big for his britches.

We can sometimes get too big for our britches as well. We boast and lord over others our popularity, our wealth, our social status. We want bragging rights because it makes us feel better about ourselves. But our egos get in the way of our relationships with God and with others. Again, God doesn’t bring troubles upon us to punish us, but sometimes God doesn’t remove them so that we might learn some humility; that we might learn to depend more on God and less on ourselves.

Thorns, in fact, can give us a special sensitivity to God. Pain and suffering have a way of drawing us closer to God. And the closer we are to God, the more real his love and grace become. And when trouble or suffering comes, we learn to trust God more, knowing that he has not abandoned us, but that he shares our suffering.

Fred Craddock, who was a respected preacher and seminary professor, tells the story of a pastor he once met with no arms. The pastor described how difficult it was as a child to put on his own clothes without any arms. He said his mother always dressed him, and he’d gotten to be a pretty big boy. But one day, she put his clothes in the middle of the floor and told her armless child to dress himself. The boy argued that he couldn’t do it and that he needed her help. She said, *You’ll have to dress yourself*, and left the room. He kicked and screamed and yelled, *You don’t love me anymore!* Finally he realized that if he were to get any clothes on, he’d have to do it himself. After hours of struggle, he was able to do it. He said, *It was not until later that I knew my mother was in the next room crying.* She shared in his suffering.

God does not cause our suffering. But sometimes God says no when we pray for it to be taken away. Although he may not deliver us *from* our suffering, he will deliver us *through* it. And in so

doing, God's grace and glory will be revealed. In our weakness, we'll come to know that Christ is strong. We'll discover that we have the strength not just to endure, but to endure faithfully, confident that God's grace is sufficient. And as we triumph – in spite of our thorn – we will be empowered by God working in us. With Paul, we can boldly say, *I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.*