

Grace Enough

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[0 : 0 0] I'm going to begin by reading another verse. You don't have to turn to it, but at 2 Corinthians chapter 10 verse 10, Paul says this, but this is someone else's words.

His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak and his speech of no account. So this is Paul describing what other people in Corinth are saying about who he is.

And if that were written today, you could imagine the same person saying, Paul looks so brave behind a keyboard, but when you see him in person, you realize what a weak fellow he actually is.

He's a nobody when you actually see him. And I think that verse is a good way of introducing our passage tonight because that criticism and all the things that go along with that criticism is what Paul is actually responding to in our passage tonight.

As you read the last few chapters of 2 Corinthians, what you realize is one of the concerns that Paul has for the church in Corinth is that a group of men have come in and have established themselves as leaders, and Paul calls them false apostles.

[1 : 1 9] And these are men who have come in, and part of the way that they have established themselves in the church is by constantly boasting about themselves, by holding themselves up as greater than all others.

They constantly compare themselves to others. So on the one hand, they hold themselves up, and then they also, any chance they get, they'll put Paul down. They'll say, remember what a weakling that man is, because of course Paul is not in Corinth, and so he's hearing all this second hand.

And that's why when you read 2 Corinthians, the word boasting is repeated so often. By my count, more than 30 times Paul uses the word boasting, and it's because there are people in the church who are boasting, and Paul doesn't like it.

And what we're going to look at tonight is how Paul responds to those false apostles, or how he's telling the church to think about those false apostles. And the way that Paul does it, ironically, is by boasting.

So we're going to look at two boasts that Paul gives tonight. I'll call them his, the first one is his lesser boast. He makes a number of lesser boasts. And then the second one we'll look at is what you could call his greatest boast.

[2 : 2 6] And so in light of that, what you could say this whole passage is about, what we're trying to get at tonight is you could say Paul's giving a lesson about leadership, about what true Christian leadership looks like and should look like, about how to identify the difference between a false apostle and a true apostle.

But I'm sure that many of you don't think of that context when you think of some of the verses here, when you think of those famous words like, my grace is sufficient to you. And it's because in addressing these specific contexts of greater apostle, lesser apostle, Paul's also getting at these universal truths about what it means to be a Christian, about what it means to live gladly in dependence on Jesus's grace.

And so that's why even though this context is a bit detached from us, it's worth listening because Paul is getting at truths that are universal and that we all need to hear. So we're going to look at the lesser boast and then the greater boast, the greatest boast.

So first the lesser boast. And you see this in verse one where Paul says, I must go on boasting, even though he says boasting is not good. So I must go on boasting because by this point he's actually been boasting for quite a few verses.

If you're keeping score at beginning at chapter 11 verse 16, until now he's been boasting about things that are great about himself. And all his boasts have been about himself establishing his worthiness to be a true apostle as opposed to what these other men are saying about him, which is that he is weak and he's a nobody.

[3 : 57] So he's been boasting and then as we come to our passage in verse one, he says, I must go on boasting though there's nothing to be gained by it. I will go on boasting of visions and of revelations of God.

And unlike his earlier boasts where he talks about himself and about the things that he has done, he says in this boast, he says, let me tell you about a man that I know.

And this man had a wonderful experience. He says, I know a guy who 14 years ago was caught up into the third heaven or as he also puts it, he was caught up into paradise.

And he says, this man, he heard things that cannot be told and which man may not utter. And now there was an early church father named Gregory of Nazianus and he talked about this passage.

And the first passage that he said was, you know, if Paul said that this experience was ineffable, it couldn't be talked about, then what we really owe this passage is the tribute of our silence.

[4 : 59] We shouldn't talk too much about what it means that this person's in the third heaven or all these things. Third heaven probably means the highest heaven. But there's so many questions you could ask about what this experience was like.

But what is clear is what Paul is doing by describing this experience because he's saying, this man that I know who had this experience of being taken up, snatched up literally in the third heaven, he's saying a man like that has something to boast about.

Any man who has had an experience like that has been given an honor by God. And so Paul, he's using logic and he's saying, imagine a man like that. Would he not be worthy of honor?

Would he not be someone that we would consider as great as Isaiah or as Ezekiel or as Elijah? We would consider him one of the greatest prophets that there are. If a man like that were in our presence, he would have something to boast about.

And Paul says, after saying that, he says, now I will boast about that man, but I will not boast about myself. Now if you're not familiar with this passage, it could be surprising to know that the person that Paul is actually talking about, the person who went up and had this experience in the third heaven is actually Paul.

[6 : 20] Paul is talking about himself in the third person. Now I say that most theologians think that this is Paul, not because I know at theologian who disagrees, but because there must be someone who disagrees with this.

But people are certain that it's Paul who is describing himself in third person. And partly because that's the only way to make sense of the context. He says, I'm going to boast about revelations.

And then he says, and then he describes revelation. And then later he'll go on and he'll talk about how in order to keep him from being conceited because of the greatness of his revelation, God gave him a thorn.

And the assumption is that he's pointing back to the revelation that he just described. So Paul is describing this revelation in third person and he's saying, I'm not going to boast about that man.

I'm only going to boast about myself and about my weaknesses. So what is Paul doing here? Well, in talking about himself in third person as weird as that is, part of what he's doing is he's distancing himself between himself as he is today and that miraculous experience.

[7 : 30] Not because he's embarrassed of it. He actually says that the man that experiences that has something to boast about. But in distancing himself from that experience, he's saying that that revelation and all the dignity that belongs to it is not something that he uses when he's with other Christians to boast about.

It's not something that he lords over other Christians. And it even seems to be the implication that when he says, I know a guy 14 years ago who had this experience, that what he's saying is, I've had this experience for 14 years and I have never once lorded this over you.

I've never once used this to boast about my greatness. And this may be the first time that the Corinthians actually hear about this story. And now a cynic might say, well, Paul, if you're so keen on not bragging about your experiences, why did you just tell us about your experience?

Because isn't it the epitome of a humble brag to say, you know, I could tell you about this thing that I've done and this thing that I've done, but I'm not going to tell you about that even though I just did.

But I think to understand what Paul is doing here, you have to appreciate the context again. Paul is boasting about himself this one time saying that he had this experience to make a point about what the false apostles do all the time.

[9 : 00] The false apostles love to boast about their experiences and to lord it over everyone else. And in 2 Corinthians chapter 10 verse 12, he describes these false apostles like this.

He says, these are men who commend themselves and they measure themselves by one another and they compare themselves with one another.

And Paul says his response to that, he says, and when they do that, they show that they are without understanding. And so Paul's approach, his response to their boast, Paul's response to their boasting, the way that he responds to it, is he himself boasts to show that if someone, to show that if we're going to measure ourselves by the greatness of our experiences and by the greatness of the things that we've done, Paul says, I could do that.

I could stand up like that and I could lord myself over others, but that's not who I am and that's not what I do. He boasts this one time just to make that point. And if you read back in chapter 11, Paul goes through this litany of boasts.

He says, does anyone consider himself a true Hebrew? I'm a true Hebrew. Does anyone consider himself a son of Abraham? Well, I'm a son of Abraham. Does anyone consider himself a servant of Christ?

[10 : 20] He says, not only am I a servant of Christ, I am an even better servant of Christ. And he gives this litany of things that he has suffered for Christ and ways that he's served the church for Christ.

And then he goes on and he says, I could even brag about my revelations. And then he says, but what he's getting at is he's saying, this is no way to live the Christian life and community is by lording ourselves, by lording our own greatness over other people.

And so that's why when Paul is boasting throughout this passage, he's also constantly hedging himself, especially in the passage before. So he'll say things like, don't think of me a fool, but I have to say this or he'll say like in verse one, he says, I must go on boasting even though there's nothing to be gained by it.

And so we could summarize Paul's implicit warning when he's giving this lesser boast like this. He's saying, beware the man or beware the woman whose greatest boast about their walk with Christ is what they have accomplished.

Or their greatest boast about their walk with Christ is about the way that God has lifted them up above others. And we could make that more personal because Paul realizes this danger is not just out there with those false apostles.

[11 : 40] In a few verses, he'll talk about his own tendency to be conceited and the need for that to be killed. And so in a way, Paul is saying, beware the tendency in our own hearts that the one thing we brag about, the one thing we talk about when we're in community is what we have accomplished, the way that we have served Christ, the way that we've given ourselves so selflessly for the cause of Christ, or the way that we feel like God has given us a closer experience of His love than others.

Paul says, beware of that man. But you can't really understand what he's contrasting the false apostles against until you get to what he calls his greatest boast.

And this is what I'm going to spend most of our time on tonight, and that's what we'll move to now. So Paul says that his greatest boast is in his weaknesses.

And just like he illustrated his boast about the revelation with a story, he illustrates his boast about weaknesses with another story. And he starts in verse seven.

And unlike the story about revelations, he makes it very clear that he is talking about himself, and he says, to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, the revelations we just mentioned.

[12 : 57] A thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. And the obvious question, one of the obvious questions when Paul says that is, what is the thorn?

And no one knows what the thorn actually is. We can say some things that we know that it's not. We know that it's not a sinful tendency in Paul.

We know that it's not a sinful urge that he has trouble controlling. Because if it were, then God would not tell him to stop praying for it to go away.

He calls it a thorn in the flesh, and so it was probably physical. And it was probably a physical condition that was either very painful or debilitating or both.

And it may well have been that Paul felt like this thorn was something that not only was painful, but it actually kept him from carrying out the mission that God had called him to as an apostle.

[14 : 00] So it was extremely painful. And we're speculating here, but this could have been the same thorn that Paul talks about in Galatians 4, 14, where, and I'm quoting this, Paul says, he says to the Galatians, you know it was because of a bodily ailment that I preached the gospel to you at first.

And though my condition was a trial to you, you did not scorn or despise me, but you received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus.

That could be the same thorn that Paul is talking about. And if it is, what it could point to is the fact that this was doubly painful for Paul, this thorn, because not only was he himself being hurt by it and debilitated by it, but he also had this awareness that it was his thorn brought a cost to others.

He tells the Galatians, you bore with me in my trial, even though you could have despised it. And that must have been hard for Paul, who wants so desperately to love the churches that he visits, to in any way be a burden to them.

And again, we don't know what the thorn is, but I would argue, many people have argued that there's something providential about that, because if Paul had told us what the thorn was, then our tendency would be to apply whatever lessons Paul derives from that thorn to that one specific issue.

[15 : 24] But that's not the way that Paul understands his thorn. And he'll go on to talk about how this one specific problem that he had, he realized that it actually applied to all of his sufferings, to all the adversity that he faced in his life.

And so Paul learns, Paul talks about how this one thorn, this one thing that he carried his whole life, is something that taught him normative truths about the way that God works.

We're going to talk about those lessons for a moment. So he learns, the first thing that he says about his thorn is that there were two sides to it. On the one hand, Paul says his thorn was truly evil.

He doesn't use the word evil, but he describes it even in more graphic terms. He says, he calls his thorn a messenger of Satan. So on one hand, what he had to go through was truly evil.

It was something that was brought about in one sense by Satan. And the reason it's important to say that plainly as Christians is because as Christians, we recognize that this world is not as it should be.

[16 : 31] And we're not afraid to look at suffering and adversity and to say, in a perfect world, these things would not exist. And in the world that God is going to make new, these things will not exist.

And what God calls us to do on the one hand when we look at suffering in our own life, or when we look at suffering in the life of others, is not to trivialize it.

We don't offer cliché sayings by saying things like, you know, it's not really all that bad. It'll all blow over. We have a right to look at all forms of suffering in this world and say, this is truly awful.

What you're walking through is painful. And there's no reason to sugarcoat that. And that's part of the truth that Paul sees in his thorn is that in his thorn, there was no intrinsic good.

In suffering, there's no intrinsic good. But what that does is it highlights, recognizing that highlights the other side of the truth about the thorn, which is that God in his awesome power is able to take something that has no intrinsic good and use it for good.

[17 : 48] God, what Paul saw in his pain was that God was that God took something that was so awful that Paul felt like he needed to pray over and over again for it to leave him.

God took something that bad and Paul saw that his hand was in it and he was transfiguring that pain and using it for good. You could say that God was turning evil against itself and turning it for good.

And what Paul sees and what he describes here is he sees how God uses the thorn in two ways, two different things that are united in a way as well.

So he sees God doing two things. The first thing that he sees is God is working in the pain of the thorn and he's working on the sinful tendencies in Paul's own heart.

And that's how he opens and closes the story, right? He says, to keep me from being conceited. He opens and closes. To keep me from being conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, God gives me the thorn.

[18 : 53] And so there's this tragic irony about the way that we handle good things in our life, right? Where we look at God and God has a tremendous capacity, this passage shows us, to take evil things and turn them for good.

And we have a tremendous capacity to take good things and turn them for evil because of our sinful nature. And so God in his mercy saw that Paul being given this awesome revelation from God, even though that in itself was a wonderful and holy and good gift, there was a tendency in Paul's heart to take that good gift and to make pride out of it.

And so some people suggest that at the very moment that God gives Paul this revelation, immediately afterwards, he gives him this thorn so that even as he gives him this blessing, he gives him a thorn to keep any sinful natures from coming out of that.

So God in his mercy gives Paul something in his life that will through God's grace squeeze the pride out of him. That's what Paul sees God doing through the thorn.

And squeeze is probably the right word because Paul saw this thorn as painful. And you can imagine Paul saying, is there no other way to take care of my pride than making me have to walk through this thorn?

[20 : 29] Could you not just tell me don't be conceited? And I say this as a side note because I don't want to make this the center of the sermon. But I wonder, I have to think that when Paul heard God say, after Paul had prayed three times will you take this from me?

After God said no, my grace is sufficient for you. I have to think that Paul's heart dropped. And that was not the news that he wanted to hear.

But I also, I wonder, I want to believe, I suspect that in hearing no, Paul also took solace from remembering who he was talking to.

Because I've been talking about how Paul is interacting with God. But if you read the passage carefully, yes, he is interacting with God. But more specifically, it looks like a conversation between him and Jesus.

Because God says my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in your weakness. And then Paul talks about how the power of Christ will rest upon him.

[21 : 37] So it seems as if Paul is reaching out directly to Christ, asking him to take away this thorn. And if that's true, think about, I wonder if it occurred to Paul that the person he's praying to is also someone who stood in a garden once facing a terrible trial.

And the Bible says that Jesus prayed three times in the Garden of Gethsemane that God would take away the trial that was in front of him. And God says, no, he walks through the trial.

And of course, Paul could see that as a terrible thing to be associated with in his own life, that he's going to have to walk through a terrible trial. But there's also the hope, I mean, Jesus' death and resurrection is the perfect example.

It's the supreme example of a truly and unambiguously awful event, an evil event happening, the Son of God being nailed to a tree and crucified.

And yet God's hand being in that and working in it, something greater than the world could have ever imagined. And I wonder if Paul took solace in that, knowing the person I'm praying to knows exactly my situation.

[22 : 51] This is a God who can sympathize with my weaknesses. And I know that if he tells me no, then there's a reason for that. And there's good that can come from this.

But let me get back to this idea that Paul surely wanted another way. And it seems like there's mercy in the fact that God puts this thorn in Paul's life as far as we can tell for the rest of his life.

And the question is why? Why can't God just say, don't be conceited, Paul? And surely he should have been able to, but it wasn't enough for Paul. And one answer that I've heard suggested, there's an old Scottish theologian named James Denney, and he described what was going on like this.

He talks about how our sinful human nature is like a crooked branch. And the way that you fix a crooked branch is not by turning it into the shape that it should be and then letting go and expecting that it will fit that new shape.

The way that you fix a crooked branch is you turn it the way that it should go and you hold it there. And you hold it there for a long, long time until finally it is so, how would you say, with you that when you let go, it's bent in the right direction.

[24 : 09] And James Denney suggested that's the same thing that is happening to Paul. But it wasn't enough just to be told once, don't be conceited, because that would be like turning it in a direction, letting it go, and it just flops right back.

God and His mercy in effect puts a brace on Paul's heart so that his tendency towards pride is constantly under pressure.

And it may be for the rest of his life so that Paul is held in place in a way that curbs the most sinful desires of his heart.

Denney puts it like this. He says, the commonest experience in the human life is that the man whom sickness and pain have humbled for the moment, the very moment the constraint is lifted, he resumes his old habit.

He does not think so, but it is really the thorn that has been keeping him right. And when its sharpness is blunted, the edge is taken from his conscience too.

[25 : 09] And isn't that the case that so often we experience adversity in our lives, and the effect that it has on us, even though we would never wish adversity on ourselves, the effect that it has on us is it makes us cry out to God, and it makes us sense viscerally our need for Him.

And we think, now I am turning to my God. And the moment that adversity is lifted, we forget all about that. And so God in this what you could call a severe mercy, he puts Paul under constant pressure so that he is constantly crying out to God for mercy and seeing God meet his needs.

So God gives Paul a trial that will stay with him. But there is a second way that is related, a second way that Paul sees God working in his trial.

He says the result of the thorn. What I saw from the result of the thorn in my life, Paul says, is that the power of God rested upon me. And you see that in verse nine.

Paul says he prays three times that God would take this away from him. And God says those famous words, my grace is sufficient for you.

[26 : 20] My power is made perfect in weakness. So God tells Paul in your weakness, you will know my grace and my grace will be what sustains you.

And that tells us something about the nature of grace that you might not often think about grace. Paul learns experientially this crucial truth that God's grace is powerful.

God's grace is power. So if you look at the wording here of what God actually says, my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.

And you see how God is using those terms interchangeably. Grace is power and power is grace in Paul's life. Now normally when we think about the word grace, we think of God's favor in our lives, God's unmarried favor.

And certainly that's in the background here. But when Paul talks about grace here, he's specifically talking about the element of grace that is powerful, the element of grace that can work in your life and can do things that you can't explain and support you in ways that you can't explain.

[27 : 30] And he's not just talking about himself, right? This is a truth that is true of all Christians that if you are in Christ, the fact that God has shown you grace.

The fact that grace is in your life means that you are forgiven of your sins. And it also means that God is working powerfully in your life, renewing you day by day and upholding you in ways that you may not be aware of.

And that's good news. But I have to say there's always been one word in this passage that I've struggled with, which is the word sufficient. Because when I think of the word sufficient, I think of the word satisfactory.

And when I think of the word satisfactory, I'm reminded of the fact that at my university, satisfactory is the word that we used to describe the lowest possible grade you can receive on an exam and still pass.

Now if you apply that logic to what Paul is talking about here, if that's what he means by sufficient, then it makes God sound stingy, doesn't it?

[28 : 35] My grace is sufficient for you. I've given you just enough, just enough so that you can hang on. And to be honest, sometimes experientially, we can feel like we've only been given just enough grace to hang on, but that is just a feeling.

That can't be what Paul means here, because this is the same Paul that says, he says to the Ephesians, I hope that God will show you, he will lavish upon you the riches of his grace.

And he also says here in just a few verses, I will boast gladly about God's grace in my life. Paul seems to think that sufficient here means something else.

Sufficient here means that when God gives us his grace, and when God says that grace is sufficient for us, God gives us all the grace that we could need.

And that's the power of grace that's being described in this passage, a grace that meets all of our deepest desires and needs. And then he says, my power is perfected in your weakness.

[29 : 41] Now I struggled with understanding this, because you certainly don't want to say, right, that God needs weakness for his power to be perfect.

It's not like God's power is imperfect, and then it becomes perfect by our weakness existing. I think the best way that I could think to describe it was like this. Where I come from is tornado land.

It's not the worst tornado land in the US, but there are tornadoes and they're a real danger. And your first prayer when you live in a place like I do is that you'll never have to come face to face with a tornado.

But your second prayer is that if you do, that your house will be strong enough. And the things that you can't see in the house, the beams and the foundation, will be strong enough to hold the house up and keep you safe.

And when the tornado, it's only when the tornado hits your home that you finally see the true strength of all the supports and all the foundations that aren't obvious in your day-to-day life.

[30 : 45] Now those beams and those supports are always there. They're always upholding the house nonstop. But it's only when the big bad storm comes that you can truly see what is the power of those foundations and of those beams.

And I think there's a similar idea to what is going on here when Paul says, when God says, my power is made perfect in weakness. God's power doesn't go from being imperfect to perfect through our weakness, but his power goes from being less evident to more evident in our weakness.

So just like a storm is the thing that you hope never happens, but it's also the very thing that exposes how truly powerful your house is.

The thorn for Paul was the thing that he hoped would never happen, but it was also the very thing that made visible to the world and visible to himself just how powerful God's grace was.

God's grace was always upholding him, never, it was always upholding him, but only when the storm came could Paul truly see how powerful it was. Could he appreciate how powerful it was?

[31 : 58] So this is part of the purpose in Paul's thorn, that it leaves him weak and in leaving him weak, he more and more is allowed to see the power of God's grace in his life.

So I'm working towards a close here very quickly. And I want to come back to the very reason that I said that this whole passage existed in the first place, which is that Paul is addressing the church about these false apostles who have made a name for themselves and who have established themselves by boasting about their greatness and by trying to humiliate Paul for his weakness, whatever those weaknesses are.

And the note that Paul ends on here when he says, I will boast about my weaknesses, the note that he ends on is not defensive, it's subversive, because he in effect, he says, these men, they call me weak in order to dismiss me as if my weaknesses are the very things for which I should be ashamed.

And Paul says, actually I look at my weaknesses and those are the very things, those are the only things that I see in my life that I want to boast about, because it's in my weaknesses that I can boast about my savior and about the way that he meets all of my needs.

And Paul is teaching a universal lesson here in a specific context. He's implying that what it means to be a true apostle is to be one who boasts extravagantly about God's grace in our weaknesses.

[33 : 36] And of course, if that's true about being an apostle, then it's true about being a Christian. That part of what it means to be a Christian is that we are people who we do boast. But the only thing that we boast in is the grace of God that has been shown to us to meet the very places in us which are the most weak.

I really enjoyed thinking about how a passage like this could be mishandled. And I thought about how someone could read this and say, you know what, if God really is glorified in weaknesses, then maybe we should make sure that all of our leaders are especially weak.

And I thought about the way that I assign the kids church rhoda. And I thought maybe God would be most glorified if I chose people who I knew would be terrible at this job.

So that God could be glorified and that we could just, let's just see what God does with all of our weak teachers. For all you know that's what I'm already doing.

But I think that's obviously not what this passage is getting at. But I think what this passage could mean is that when our leaders are leading and when our teachers are downstairs teaching the kids, they're constantly and in their own way in different ways teaching these children about what it means that all of us are weak and all of us need to be upheld by God's grace and that far from being something to be embarrassed about, that's the very thing that defines us as Christians.

[35 : 04] We are all here and our only right to be here is to claim to you people who need the grace of Jesus Christ in our lives. And if you don't believe that, maybe you're a false apostle.

But if you do believe that, you're a welcome here and you're welcome to call on the grace of Jesus Christ because his grace is sufficient for us. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we praise you for your grace. We pray that we would never step on your grace, that we would never mock it, but that we would lean into it, that we would call to you for support and that we would see that far from looking for you to bring grace into our lives that we would see that you have already been gracious to us, Lord.

Help us to rest in what we already know to be true about you and your sufficient grace. In your son's name we pray. Amen.