

It's Enough!

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[0 : 00] Now this morning I want to turn back to the passage that we read together in 2 Corinthians chapter 12. Very well known verse which will act as the summary or the theme of our study this morning.

2 Corinthians chapter 12 and in verse 9. But he said to me, Paul in all his struggles and all his difficulties, we're going to look at a little bit.

Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take that is the thorn in the flesh away from me. But he said to me, my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.

Now for those who are part of the congregation who have been here over the last number of weeks and months looking at this theme of grace, I'm going to say what I've probably said before, but I'm going to say again at the beginning of this sermon, and this is probably the most significant one yet.

I've probably said that at least every second week. But as we think about grace and as we think about God's grace in our lives and as we think about the society we live in, the mentality and the thinking of the world that we are in, and the kind of material pleasures and enjoyments that we have, this is really a fantastically significant and relevant study or element to our study of grace, in understanding ourselves, in understanding God and in understanding the world that we live in.

[1 : 38] So I hope that you will stick with me in this, that you will dig deep, that you will concentrate. I'm wanting that very much today, both this morning and this evening. I want you to really put on a concentrated head and listen to the word of God, it wrestles with that word as it applies to us.

If we are Christians, then we are people who have been touched by grace and we should want to know all its different aspects, all its different characteristics. And if we are not Christians, then I hope you'll be really challenged by the message to consider very seriously your need for God's grace in your life, dig deep as we consider that.

And I think it's very significant because of the lives we live. There's two kind of extremes that we might consider today, I'm going to maybe consider one more than another. When people are really struggling, when things are really bad in their lives as Christians, many people will say, well where's God in this?

And what's the point of being a Christian? And I tried being a Christian but God let me down in so many different ways that I just gave up because it was such a struggle and it was so difficult.

Cursed God and die when we're going through difficulties and struggles. Cursed God, get him out of your system, curse him and die.

[2 : 59] And maybe sometimes at the other extreme when life is so good, you're healthy, you've got a great family, things are going well at your work, you're blessed in many different ways and the bank balance is good.

And it's easy in that way to let go of grace, maybe not curse God because it's the other extreme, but let go of grace, you don't really need it, things are going well, you're self-sufficient.

And so you can loosen your grip on grace, easy for us to loosen our grip on grace, probably more so when things are going well than when things are going badly.

But nonetheless, there's temptations in both of these things. It's interesting I read this week about Steve Jobs, the Apple founder, and he apparently gave up his Christianity and his Christian upbringing as a young man when he read about all the problems and this pain and the loss of life in Africa among children and the impotence of his church that he brought up to do anything about that.

And I think that would be a very common, I'm not making any judgment on him on that basis, but just noting that that would be a very common response of people who will say, well, we live in what kind of God is there and we just abandon God and turn our backs on God because of the suffering and the difficulties and the pain that there might be.

[4 : 28] But the truth of God's word does challenge, or the truth challenges some of our presuppositions in life. And some of these are maybe deep-seated, some of them maybe we don't consider, some of them may not be ours.

But often, is it not the case that we want to control God ourselves? We want a nice, manageable, malleable God, a God that we can make in our own image, that we can keep and that we can control ourselves.

We do, all of us, I would imagine, to a greater or lesser extent, want an easy life. We want things to go swimmingly for us. That's not necessarily a bad thing, but it can infiltrate our whole concept of life and of God and of His dealings with us.

We want a God without mystery, a God that we can know from A to Z, a God who we can wholly keep in our minds and know every turn and every decision that He makes that doesn't cause us to be mysteriously worshipping at His feet.

We sometimes, I think, grace is just another word for being spoiled. We just want God to come and rubber back us and to give us a great life and everything being brilliant for us.

[5 : 46] And so we see grace as just something that God gifts us and we've been looking at the wonderful gift of grace, but often in the context of maybe just spoiling us in life.

And the trouble is when we have these concepts, when we have these ideas of God and then difficulty comes or problems come or issues come into our lives, then we find ourselves, it's easy for us to reject that kind of God.

But in reality what we're doing is we're rejecting a God who doesn't exist. We're rejecting a God who we have made in our own image. It's like the British public, we're building people up and then knocking them down when they become rich and famous.

We're always being accused of that, but spiritually we can do the same thing. We can build God up in our own image, the kind of God we want, the kind of God that's important. Then when things don't work out, we knock them down.

We curse God and die. So it's important that we are challenged by the truth of God's own word. And the confrontation sometimes of God's own word.

[6 : 52] What does blessing mean? Does it mean that we are spoiled? Or does it mean that we can know God's peace and God's comfort and God's strength even in difficulties in our lives?

Or are we confronted by the reality that today we are living as Christians, that we have life to the full but we're also dying?

And the spiritual concepts behind that dying, which we may look at, that as we said, was it last week, that we welcome people to the faith of Christ, that they come into the Kingdom and we say welcome to the warfare.

Welcome to the spiritual warfare. That God confronts us with Him being far bigger than we can ever imagine.

And that bad things happen to the righteous. I've chosen deliberately not to say that bad things happen to good people. Because sometimes our definition of goodness and of good people might be different from God's.

[7 : 59] But that bad things happen to the righteous. Bad things happen to those who have come to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

And what I want you to do this morning, at least for part of the time, is to consider Paul. Consider Paul's life here. And consider his character and consider his experience.

Paul was a horrible guy. He was legalistic, he was a murdering rich, he was a powerful political animal, and he was a coward.

He wasn't a nice guy. And yet on that road to Damascus, this Paul who was being used by Satan to attempt to destroy the fledgling Utesimid church that we're looking at in our evening worship in the study of Acts, Paul was arrested on the road to Damascus.

It's a word. He was arrested on the road to Damascus by Jesus Christ. With all that guilt and with all that darkness and with all that murderous, angry intent to destroy this way, this Christian way, and he met with God who said to him, Why are you persecuting me?

[9 : 27] You know, nothing greater than that recognition. David in Psalm 51 against you, you only have I sinned. And he saw God for who God was and yet he was touched.

He was arrested, brought into that place of forgiveness by Jesus Christ. Could I say he was radicalized by love, completely changed round his whole way of living and his whole way of thinking.

He was healed and he was humbled. And there was never anyone who was more undeserving of that. And he knew that himself. He was undeserving of God's gift of grace.

Nothing you could take to God and list before God and say, Well, at least you need to accept me for this. There was nothing. It was entirely an act of God's powerful and glorious grace.

And Paul is radicalized and he's changed. He becomes a good news vendor. That's what he does. He starts going around the country telling people about Jesus Christ, that he sought to destroy months earlier and he was greatly blessed.

[10 : 41] Wasn't he? There's probably not been a more effective church planter in the whole of Christian history than Paul. What a turnaround in his life. He knew God's peace and God's forgiveness and God's grace and God's acceptance.

His character was being changed. His relationships were being changed. Everything in his life. People couldn't believe it. What was happening to Paul? As he was blessed with this new life of grace.

Great Christian. And yet, he had the pits of a life, humanly speaking.

He knew terrible suffering. Absolutely terrible suffering. He knew persecution because of the message he was bringing from those who didn't believe.

He knew trouble even within the church from his, as it were, humanly speaking, his children. Those who had come to faith through his preaching.

[11 : 48] He knew terrible difficulty in the whole of his lifestyle and his travelling and his personal health.

And even from the element, you know, even from shipwreck and from storms. And from all of these things that we would directly attribute to God's lordship and sovereignty.

The weight of pastoral care upon him. If you read the previous chapter of his sufferings, you get some kind of idea of him being robbed and being shipwrecked and being left for dead and beaten up with rods and last 40 times minus one.

Which generally meant that 39 was enough to kill you. And he knew all of these things. And you look at his life and you say, it sucks.

I don't want that. If that's what God's about, then I don't want that. If this is God's blessing someone, I certainly don't want his curse.

[12 : 52] I don't want his judgment. If that's what it is to believe in God, then I'd rather just head off down into the sunset, go down to the pub and have a quiet drink. Curse God and die, Paul, because your life's miserable.

It's rotten. Things are just going from bad to worse. You came to faith and it seems like all hell has broken loose around you in your life.

Terrible suffering. And what do we learn from Paul through that suffering?

The one thing I really want to stress is that he wasn't a stoic. He didn't look at all that suffering and praise God and give thanks. Easily and cheaply for what he was going through.

Please recognize that because that's an important reality for us. Because it's like a robot, if that's the case. And if you think Christians respond that way in a robotic way, then you'll think that's alien.

[13 : 56] That's unnatural. What do we learn about Paul then? We recognize that he struggled with what he was going through. In 2 Corinthians 1, 8 and 9 he says, we were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired.

We despaired even of life. He was someone in verse 29, we're told that he was incredibly weak and he didn't feel weak.

Who's weak and I don't feel weak? Who's led into sin and I don't inwardly burn? And in verse 8 when he talks about this thorn in his flesh, he says he pleaded with God that it would be removed.

Pleaded with God. He didn't just ask casually as he was walking down the Damascus road, he pleaded with God, please take away this thorn. I've known persecution, shipwreck and beatings.

Please don't give me physical illness. Please don't give me this thorn in the flesh. So he pleaded. He struggled with God. He wrestled with God. He took it to God.

[15 : 03] But then also we learn from Philippians 4, he says that I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need. I know what it is to be in plenty.

I have learned the secret of being content in any and every circumstance. You see that important disciple attitude that he was someone who through all that was learning.

He was learning through darkness. He was learning through difficulty. He was learning through tears and through pleadings to God about God Himself.

And he was learning about Himself, wasn't he? He knew. You see, he knew. What's happened to Paul? I didn't mention this kind of in all the blessings that he had and all the blessings.

I didn't mention the fact that he was in heaven. But he'd gone to heaven. He speaks about that in the passage that we read. He was caught up into the third heaven, caught up to paradise.

[16 : 06] He heard inexpressible things. He heard things that Jesus wanted him to know that he could teach the church. Some things he wasn't even able to share.

He was in heaven. What a blessing that was as he met with the risen Savior. And he goes on to say, to keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations that was given me a thorn in my flesh.

He knew that blessings in the Christian life can sometimes lead to pride. You know, a great amount of blessings can sometimes lead to pride.

I'm the best Christian that ever lived. I've been taken into God's nearer presence. I've been in paradise. It could lead to that. And he knew his own heart. It could also lead to self-sufficiency.

Blessings can lead to self-sufficiency. We don't need to worry about where our next meal comes from. We don't need to worry about the next hospital appointment. We don't need to worry about the next response of our child.

[17 : 14] We don't need to worry about meeting with the boss who might tell us our job is finished. When we're being blessed, when things are going great for us, we can become self-sufficient.

And sometimes we can become proud. This has a hardening influence. It can have a hardening influence in our lives.

It can have that. It's harder for the rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven and for the camel to go through the eye of a needle because there's that recognition that it can lead us to holding loosely on a grace just in the same way as trouble attempts us to curse God and die.

But we recognize that knowing and experiencing grace includes, what does it include?

It includes crucifixion. Knowing and experiencing grace includes crucifixion. Ah, it's not so nice.

[18 : 26] We like hearing about grace. We love the free gift. We love the love of God. We love its all-encompassing, complete, finished work in our lives, but we're not so keen on the concept of grace, including crucifixion.

Crucifying our old self, crucifying our destructive self-reliance, but it's the cost of life.

It's the cost of being gifted eternal life. So one or two characteristics then of grace coming from what Paul is teaching us here or what God is teaching us through Paul.

We're reminded that grace isn't just about God's love to us. It's about His divine power in us, isn't it?

My grace is sufficient for you. My power is made perfect in weakness. The gift of becoming a Christian, of accepting salvation, isn't, and I really want to stress this.

[19 : 30] It's not just passive. It's not just that we accept grace and say, well, it's wonderful. God loves me now, but that we are indwelt then by His Holy Spirit, which is the Spirit of power, power to transform us into changes and to enable us to live for Jesus Christ, so that Jesus promised in Acts chapter 1, but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you.

That we overflow with hope, Paul says, by the power of the Holy Spirit. So His grace to us is also the gift of His life. That is the Holy Spirit in our lives as Christians, power to change, isn't it?

So that you become a Christian and you don't just carry on in the same trajectory that you've always been on, that you've changed completely around and that you're facing God and that you've been given the power of His grace to live for Him.

It's a power that will bring us to our knees, but lift us onto His shoulders. It's not about humiliating us, it's humbling us so that we can be on His shoulders, so that grace for us can never just be a feel-good factor.

It's never just about feeling great about ourselves or dream fulfillment. God doesn't come into our lives so that we can be anything that we want to be.

[20 : 58] It's not about a health, wealth and prosperity gospel. That's not the gospel of the good news of the New Testament. Grace brings us to the place where we are empowered to recognize that we need Him and that He knows better than we know and that our lives can be whatever He wants them to be for His glory.

Now that's unpalatable. I'm sure there's some of us feeling pretty uneasy about that today because we want God to give us the kind of life that we want.

Not the kind of life He wants for us, but He knows and He loves. And His grace for us is more than enough.

My grace, He says, is sufficient for you. That doesn't mean it'll do. It doesn't mean well you'll get by with it. It means it's absolutely and completely sufficient.

It's power that can never be drained. In every circumstance where you are tested to within a hair's breadth of your life, His grace is sufficient to take you through it.

[22 : 14] And I'm not saying we'll not struggle through that because Paul did, but it's struggle we must and appropriating Christ. We must do.

It might not be what we want, but it's sufficient. And it will provide for us the impossibility of responding in a glorifying way to God.

Now I want to say a little bit about that. Just now, grace is more than enough and it enables us to bring glory to God.

Now that is utterly and completely counter anything that naturally we could ever say or preach. Grace, the power of God's grace is sufficient to enable us to bring glory to God in the bad things.

See, our tendency is to self-sufficiency, to being powerful in our own strength and independent of God. We have, we believe, I think, naturally in Trenchbow theology, I'm smart, you're dumb, I'm big, you're little, I'm right, you're wrong.

[23 : 26] The Tilda theology, theology which says that of God, I know, I'm right, you're wrong, I'm big, you're small.

Cursed God and die when things go wrong for us in trials. Grace enables us, grace gives us the power to trust. It's easy to trust when things are going well, isn't it?

To trust when things are going very badly. When other Christians are utterly and completely miserable and rotten and horrible to you, not that that is ever excused.

Possible to give God the glory when we are dying with cancer. To give God the glory. It's a mark of great maturity and great understanding that we can like Paul say, therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses.

I don't think I can say that. Would any of you hold up your hands to say you could say that? I will boast in my weakness if it brings the strength of God to bear.

[24 : 35] It's not just saying, you know, glory and being pathetic. It's not saying that at all. It's saying you're boasting in a different kind of strength. It's not that we're weak.

It's that we're weak in ourselves but we're strong in Christ. Strong faith, strong trust in Him. Trusting in Him when things aren't going the way we want them to go.

So the big question I have to ask myself and I have to ask, if I'm being honest and I'm being faithful to God today, I have to ask to all of us, how do you think we react?

What's your theology like when things are going rough, when things are going badly for you? Tragedy and illness and unemployment and loss and injustice.

When you've been treated abysmally, what's your response? Curse God and die. What kind of God is that? I thought if I'd be giving my Christian things, it would go great for me.

[25 : 30] Do we sulk? Do we turn away? Is the last place we go, is the last place we wrestle on our knees?

Because it's not easy. Paul pled, Paul despaired even of life, but he still went to God and God provided him with the sufficiency of grace to take him through.

How do we react? Our Christianity isn't judged by how we react in great times when things are easy or on a church pew.

Our Christianity is measured by how we react in darkness and how we react when things aren't going. When we don't feel him and we don't feel his closeness and we don't feel his love, we feel a cold draft.

Is that what marks our Christianity? What kind of feeling we're getting? What warmth there is? What fuzziness we've got inside? Is that what it's about?

[26 : 30] And if we don't feel that, we walk away. God's abandoned me. God's turned away. God hasn't been with me. Now these will be all the kind of thoughts we have, but we wrestle with God about them and take them to God.

Read Job, read the Psalms, read the struggles. But take them to God. Grace enables us, oh it's a miracle to bring glory to God.

You'll be open-mouthed if someone is able to honour God in difficulty rather than blame Him. It will be gobsmacked. It will change your life to see a Christian who can say thanks be to God.

His grace is sufficient for me in this. It will radicalise your whole understanding and mind of Christianity. It gives glory to God. It's also counter-subversive.

That sounds kind of a bit terrorist and technical. But what I mean by counter-subversive, grace is counter-subversive, in that it's this recognition that we're in a battle spiritually, okay?

[27 : 38] And Satan is out to subvert our experience of God to, he wants us to curse God and die, doesn't he?

That's the response he wants from us. Oh that's good, yeah. Things are going bad. Cursed God and die. That's what he wants from us. That's the response he wants. So he's subverting God's goodness to us.

And grace is counter-subversive in the sense that it takes what Satan intends to destroy us and turns it on its head to be something that can be used for God's glory.

Paul recognised that. I didn't say a thorn in his flesh, a messenger of Satan. He recognised, Paul, right Grace, that he was in danger of being conceited, wasn't it?

So to keep me from being conceited, he was given a messenger of Satan. Now Satan came into Paul's life and he wasn't wanting him to not be conceited. He would have been very happy if Paul was conceited and proud.

[28 : 42] So Satan had one aim in the thorn in the flesh was to destroy Paul's faith in God, to curse God and die, to question who God is.

Does God really, right from the beginning, is the Genesis 3, does God really, does he really love you? Does he? Is that right? Does he care for you? Of course God didn't die.

Look at the thorn in the flesh. You've gone through all that you've gone through and now he's given you this. Man, that's the icing on the cake, Paul. Give him up. But Paul recognises by Grace that God can use that.

It's counter-subversive. God can use bad things. And I don't say that cheaply. And I don't say that from a theological white page. I say that recognising there's great mystery in that and I think as Christians you be very careful, as I need to be very careful, who you say that to.

And don't say it to someone that's going through difficulties. Let them come to that conclusion. Don't give out trite advice from Scripture. Oh, things work together for good.

[29 : 44] Yeah, no problem. Saints doing that by God's turn on its head. People need to learn that for themselves. It's not easy and it's not cheap. It, we're forced to bow the knee to God's mystery in that and thank Him that evil in our lives isn't random and isn't sovereignly abusive.

And the last characteristic of Grace from this I'd like to share is that it's a gift-best shared. We live very often in our lives, maybe less than other people certainly, but we do live for many of us in a veil of tears.

We live with a lot of sadness and difficulty in our lives. And if you live with that kind of difficult sadness, then know that you're the kind of person that alone can come alongside others.

And we've been weak in ourselves and thrown onto God's grace in mysterious inexplicable circumstances and been able to say His grace is sufficient for us.

You will be the best pastor. You'll be the best helper. You'll be the best friend of others. You'll have compassion and empathy in a way that the party central guy will never be able to because party central people have no empathy.

[31 : 14] They just want a good time. And they cross the street to avoid people who are struggling because they're not interested in that. They just want good time living.

Party central. What is it that we're looking for? Will we be used by God in the darkness of our lives to come alongside and share the grace that we've received in our darkness with those who need it most?

That will make us truly valuable in the kingdom to have pastoral, sympathetic, godly, experienced and real lives to share with others.

Now I have no doubt in conclusion that it's easy to preach a truth like this. It's hugely difficult to live it.

You will all struggle with darkness of one degree or another. And all I can do is ask that you will plead with God through your darkness spiritually, that you will learn to become content in poverty or in riches, whatever God gives you, learn that through pleading with Him, being that disciple of His that takes life's experiences and doesn't let them knock them dead but lets these experiences mould them with God's grace and with God's strength.

[32 : 50] That you would lay hold of grace and in a couple of weeks, Neil will be preaching in the morning, two or three weeks I think it is, and he will focus on that theme of laying hold of grace.

I'm not going to steal his thunder by taking that today. But it's something we need to lay hold. It's not just somewhere up there in the ether. We need to lay hold of it. We have that responsibility when troubles come.

So I ask you today as I have to ask myself, when trouble comes, when the storms of life come, which inevitably they will, and we're in a young energetic healthy congregation for the most part here, and maybe you think miles away, years ahead, not about me, but can I say when the foundation, when the storms of life hit, which they will, and they will sooner sometimes rather than later, what's your foundation?

Are you going to walk away from God when trouble hits and say, well I thought you loved me God, I wanted an easy life. I just wanted to turn up in church now and again and then walk away again.

But it's rubbish. Are we going to curse God, or are we going to plead with Him and seek His grace and find that His grace is sufficient for us, because it will deepen your experience of His character and of His love.

[34 : 10] And can I ask you also, because God does this, Jesus does it in the Sermon and the Mount, what is your foundation when the storms of life come? If you're not a Christian, on whom can you trust?

Because you may feel you get through all these troubles, you're strong, you're young, you're independent, but they will gradually knock you down. You will not be able to live to God's glory through them if you're not a Christian.

You will not have His grace to sustain you and to give you that counter-impossible claim, my grace is sufficient for you, but above all you will die.

And you will walk through that valley alone. However good you have experienced and enjoyed life, and you will remain under His judgment.

That's why grace is so important and why Jesus is so important. Please speak to somebody. If you're not a Christian and you want to know more about the Christian life and the Christian faith, don't put it off.

[35 : 19] And remember what the Holy Spirit says here, my grace is sufficient for you, my power is made perfect in your weakness. Utterly counter-cultural.

Let's bow our heads and pray. Lord God, we ask and pray that you would take your word and you would apply it to our hearts and lives.

We have such a tendency, Lord, to independence, to prayerlessness, to a casual theological head orthodoxy that never touches our hearts and never touches our souls and our behaviour.

We are practical atheists so often despite our claims otherwise. Well at least I am. Lord, we pray and ask that as we live our lives that we would take Christ into and through the dark times and the struggles and find Him to be sufficient and find that to be amazing grace.

May that be our experience. We pray, Lord God, help us to appropriate your grace today. And I pray particularly for those who may have come on the edge today who may have thought, well this will be my last time in church.

[36 : 41] I am going to give up on God. I am going to turn away, curse God and die. May it be that you will speak to them in your love and in your compassion and in your sovereign glory and change the direction of their lives for Jesus' sake.

Amen. Amen.