

“Clay & Thorns” 2 Corinthians 12:6-10

“And they all lived happily ever after...” Where do I find that in the Bible?

If you said, “It is not found in the Bible!” you would be correct. However, some people tend to think that is what it means to be a Christian – that once we invite Jesus into our lives there will be no more struggles or sickness or pain. God just wants you to be healthy and happy (and they sometimes add “and rich.”)

That is not what my Bible says. Since I choose to let God direct my life by His Spirit through His Word, I need to know what God’s Word really does say.

Before we read our text, I want to do a little review. The children and children’s workers have not been able to be a part of our journey of grace, so here is the quick review:

- before we even think of God He is working in our lives trying to awaken faith. That is called seeking or prevenient grace.
- there needs to be a moment in our lives when we repent of our sin, ask Jesus to forgive us and to come into our lives. In that moment we are born again. God in the one who provided for our salvation through Jesus and saves us as we put our faith in Him alone. That is saving grace.
- God’s work is not completed when our sins are forgiven. God also wants our lives to reflect the image of Jesus to our world – we are to be Christ like. Though we may surrender ourselves to this process in a moment, it will be a lifetime journey. This work of God in our lives through the Holy Spirit to make us more and more like Christ is called sanctifying grace.
- sustaining grace is how God keeps us from falling, as promised in Jude1:24.
- today we see one more way God works in our lives by His grace in something we will call “sufficient grace.” The Apostle Paul, among others, will introduces us to this.

As we noted earlier, there is no verse in the Bible that says we will live happily ever after once we become a Christian. In fact, there are many verses that remind us that once we step over the line onto God’s side, the enemy of our souls, Satan, starts his attack. He hates to lose anyone and will do whatever he can to try and discourage and confuse and trip you up. When Peter tells us that “Satan is a roaring lion seeking whom he can devour” he is speaking about devouring Christians! (1 Peter 5:8) Of course God’s grace is there to protect us if we stay under His protection.

The Apostle Paul introduces us to another reason why we need God’s grace in our lives as followers of Jesus in his letter to the Corinthians. We need God to help us be strong because we do face trials, and troubles, suffering and pain. Listen to what God says through the Apostle:

6 Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool, because I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain, so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say,

7 or because of these surpassingly great revelations. Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.

8 Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from 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 about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me.

10 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 we have the great apostle to the Gentiles admitting that life was not always easy for him. In fact, he has had to endure hardships, persecution, and all kinds of difficulties. Back in chapter 11 of 2 Corinthians Paul described some of the hardships he endured:

- sent to prison more times than he can remember
- beaten more times than he can count
- flogged with 39 lashes five times
- beaten with Roman rods three times
- stoned and left for dead
- shipwrecked three times
- had to fight off robbers and thieves
- travelled in the heat and suffered cold, gone without sleep and food
- betrayed by people who he thought were his friends (2 Corinthians 11:23-27)

Now if we thought anyone deserved to have a happily ever after life it might be the Apostle Paul, a man of great faith and courage who planted more churches than anyone else in the New Testament era. The Holy Spirit was so active in his life he knew where to go, and where not to go, to preach the Gospel. God worked many miracles through his life...

Yet Paul still suffered much through his life. Few of us have suffered as much. And in the passage we just read he speaks of a “thorn in his flesh” that he asked the Lord to remove three times.

What was that thorn? Paul never directly says, and Bible scholars have come up with many suggestions. The two main thoughts are that it was either some person in his life who was a constant pain – always opposing him and causing trouble, or it was some physical infirmity.

We know that the Apostle had trouble with his eyesight. He speaks of signing his letters with large script because of his poor eyesight, and he says that some of the Christians would be willing to give him their eyes if they could (cf. Galatians 4:16). Some have suggested that this might have been a side effect of contracting malaria, which was rampant in many places where Paul preached.

The truth is, we do not know what the thorn in the flesh was. But we do know Paul specifically prayed three times for God to remove this and God did not. Instead God made Paul a promise. What did he say? **“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”**

This kind of grace is what we are calling “sufficient grace.”

No matter what we face in life, when God is with us we can endure. Actually, we can more than endure, we can come through victorious.

In 1967 a 17 year old girl dove into a lake, not realizing how shallow the water was. Her neck was severed in several places, leaving that girl, Joni Erickson, a quadriplegic. This means she could not use her hands or legs anymore. She was confined to a wheelchair. Joni had to battle depression and thoughts of suicide in the months following the accident. She was also ready to give up on God. But she did not, and though her life is still very difficult, she has found that God’s grace is sufficient for even situations like hers. At her 70th birthday party – an event no doctor ever dreamed she would live to see, she said this:

“I’m grateful for the grace of God which enables me to keep smiling not in spite of my disability, but because of it,” says Joni, “For the weaker I am, the harder I must lead on God!”

This is the truth God wants us to grasp through the words of the Apostle Paul. God’s power is made perfect in our weakness. Some of the greatest growth Christians experience in their spiritual lives is when they are going through the most difficult times. It is then they discover that God is faithful, He never leaves you or forsakes you, and He will give you strength to endure and triumph.

I often hear people tell how their faith went to a much deeper level when they faced cancer, or the heart attack, or the injury. How could that be? In their weakness, God poured His grace on them, to help them not only endure but triumph.

When my uncle, who had walked away from God for over four decades, got cancer, God stirred his heart, and in true repentance and faith, he accepted Jesus as Lord of His life. My uncle died a radiant, joyful Christian. That is sufficient grace.

Knowing God is with us, even through the darkest days, we can say as Jesus said on his darkest day, the day he was nailed to a cross, “into your hands I commit my spirit.”

There are two basic types of Psalms in the Bible:

– the Hallel, from which we get our word Halleluiah which we recite when everything is going well for us. Halleluiah!

- the laments, where the psalmist asks God, “Why is this happening?” and “How long will it last?” These are the Psalms we reflect on when we are going through pain and troubles. Jesus referred to a lament while on the cross as he recited the words from Psalm 22, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me.”

Dr. Busic, from our journey of grace study, suggests that 70% of the Psalms are laments. But, laments were not about abandoning faith, they were about affirming faith in the God who was still in control and would rescue His people in His time and in His way. These are Psalms that say with the Apostle Paul, “His grace is sufficient.”

“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me.”
(Psalm 23)

This morning we have a choice to make. We can live in fear, anger, mistrust, and bitterness as we go through the hard times, or we can see that God is still with us, and if we will yield ourselves to him, we will find His grace is sufficient.

Dr. Busic concludes with these words: “We are stronger in our weakest moments when the Lord is with us than our strongest moments without Him.”

As the Apostle Paul learned, “God’s power is made perfect in our weakness.” When I am weak, then He is strong. Do you believe that today? Will we live in that confidence? God wants to give us sufficient grace for whatever we have to face in this fallen world. Will we receive it?