

A thorny problem

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[0 : 00] Let us turn to the portion that we read together. Paul's second epistle to the Corinthians, chapter 12, reading at verse 7.

Lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of revelation that was given to me as all in flesh, the messenger of Satan, to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure.

Through this thing I bespoke the Lord Christ that it might be passed on me, and he said to me, My grace is sufficient for thee, and my grace is made perfect in wisdom.

Thank you, Lord. So it is clear enough from this chapter itself that there were problems in the church at Corinth.

We wrote it for nothing but verse 21, as we have it here, where the apostle speaks that when he comes again, that he is afraid that he shall bewail many who have sinned already and have not repented of the uncleanness and fornication and lasciviousness which they have committed.

[1 : 32] So it is obvious enough what the situation was, that there was uncleanness, that there was fornication, and that there was lasciviousness, all of which are sins of the flesh, lust of the flesh, if you like, and Paul is aware that this sort of thing was going on in the church of Corinth.

And he has already suggested to the church of doing these things that they should repent of doing them, that they should be sorry for these things which they have done, and that in being sorry for them, they should forsake these things altogether.

But yet there is rumour coming back to him that really there isn't that true repentance at all amongst those who were doing these things, that there isn't the forsaking of these things at all, and that is the great fear that Paul has when he says, I'm afraid, he says, that when I come to you again, what is going to happen to me is that I'm going to bewail those of you who have continued in these things.

So then, obviously, there were problems in the church of Corinth. But Paul, in these verses that we read, verses 7 to 9, is speaking about not really the problem that was present in the church of Corinth, but about a problem which he himself was experiencing.

He says that there was given to him a falling flesh. He was a messenger of faith and to batter him, lest he should be exhausted above mission.

[3 : 25] And he says that he be so if he prays to the Lord three times over, that this thing might be taken from him, that it might be removed completely out of his life.

And then he tells us the answer that he received from the Lord. The Lord said to him, My grace is sufficient for thee, for my strength is made perfect in weakness.

And these are the words upon which I would like to spend in the next half hour or so this morning. I shall do so as the Lord helps me in five separate settings.

First of all, I want to speak to you in connection with the nature of his affliction. It is obviously an affliction he's got when he speaks of it as being a form in the flesh.

And then secondly, the way in which the apostle describes this affliction, he speaks of it as picturing a form in his flesh, or as a messenger of Satan to death at him.

[4 : 36] That's the way in which he describes this affliction for us. Thirdly, the way in which he feels themselves confronting this affliction, he feels weak.

And surely that is brought to our attention in verse 9, where the Lord says, And my strength is made perfect in weakness. As if God was stated, I know that you are weak in confronting this affliction, but my strength is made perfect in your weakness.

Hopefully, the method that Paul adopts for the removal of this affliction, he bespeaches the Lord three times over for us.

And then finally, the answer that the apostle receives in regard to his prayer. These five things, and we must be brief with them all in order to pack it all into the next half hour.

Beginning then with the nature of his affliction, there are three suggestions being made amongst commentators as to the sort of affliction that Paul is speaking of here, that he himself was experiencing.

[6 : 03] There are both, first of all, who think that the affliction he speaks of was a bodily affliction. That it was some physical deformity that he had himself in his own body.

And those who suggest that use say that suggestion upon the fact that Paul was almost blind.

You remember that day when he was on his way to Damascus and when this great light appeared in the sky which caused Paul to experience temporary blindness.

And so eventually scales did fall of his eyes yet there are commentators who maintain that he never really got his own sight back again.

That his sight was very dim thereafter. And therefore they say this is the nature of the affliction that the apostle is speaking about.

[7 : 14] He is speaking about his fact and that this is the form and the flesh at which he has been gored almost constantly. And this is the problem that he is facing.

There are those secondly who maintain that it wasn't a physical affliction at all but rather a mental affliction. that is not to say that the apostle was going wrong in his mind or any such thing but that there were things which were worrying him and which were causing him great mental stress and bringing him down into the very depths of depression in the last.

Now those who suggest such an opinion base their opinion upon the following reason. Even the Corinthians themselves they looked upon Paul as someone who wasn't really like the other apostles.

He wasn't like Peter and James and John. Peter and James and John had walked with Jesus but Paul wasn't like that.

Paul was someone who came later on and had no right to call himself an apostle of Jesus Christ. And they lay stress upon this in their messages to Paul as as to say what right have you to call yourself an apostle of Jesus Christ.

[8 : 50] And this is something which is getting to Paul. This is something which is causing mental stress if you like that these people are saying to him that he has no right to call himself an apostle of Jesus Christ.

Again these same Corinthians in 2 Corinthians chapter 5 they are choosing of being beside themselves. That is to say they are choosing of being mad.

They are choosing of having lost control of themselves. Of of having gone beyond normal capacity normal reasoning and just having as it were lost control of himself in his preaching.

That was another accusation that these Corinthians were laying down in something. There was a third thing and that is that the more abundantly he loves the less he is going to be loved in return.

So you can imagine how difficult a thing that is. Here is a man who says I love the whole of the Christian church. I love the whole of the Christian church in Corinth.

[10 : 05] And yet even furthermore abundantly I love the Christian church in Corinth the less I am going to be loved in return.

You can see how that compared in the apostles. A little burden yourself if you tried to love everybody and then realized that there was nobody that really loved you or that there was very little love towards you in return.

How that would become a burden on your own mind is the last. And so therefore perhaps there are grounds there for thinking that indeed the problem the affliction that Paul was suffering was of a mental nature.

There are those heardly who speak of this affliction as being a spiritual affliction as if to say that Paul himself was being bothered and interrupted by some lust of the flesh.

That there was an sin which just did not leave him alone. That there was a besetting thing that there was something that was very constantly bothering him as a Christian and that this besetting thing became such a worry to the apostle who feels he cannot make progress in the spiritual life while this thing this lust is following him everywhere that he goes.

[11 : 46] So it could be either of the three things that I have mentioned to you there. It could have been physical it could have been mental or it could have been spiritual and I am afraid that we in the 20th century are in no position to decide emphatically as to what indeed of the three things it may have been that became such an affliction for Paul in his own life.

I'm sure before I finish up with point one I'm sure that we ourselves in our day to day lives that in one way or another we experience afflictions like that too.

We experience sometimes physical afflictions where our bodies are sore in one way or another or where we lack something maybe lack speech or lack hearing or lack eyesight in one way or another and how that can become a hindrance to us even in our spiritual life.

We experience mental problems, mental afflictions just the same as some of these great men, Elijah, whom we were speaking not so long ago in the prayer meeting, how he suffered from this mental affliction.

You and I can experience the same thing and we can go into terrible distress of mind, we can panic, we can despair even.

[13 : 24] You and I again, we can experience spiritual problems and I speak to those who are Christians and who are so tired and weary of the loss of the flesh, following them and interrupting their Christian lives, perhaps even sometimes overcoming them in their Christian lives.

We can therefore relate in one way or another perhaps to what Paul is speaking of here as being an affliction which he will experience.

Then let me go on to point two, the way in which he described this affliction for us and he does so in a very effective manner.

He builds up for us a little imaginary picture and he says to us, you know what it's like to say, it's like having a thorn in one's flesh.

That is one of the ways in which I can picture this thought, this affliction that I am seeing. So can you for a moment just drop everything out of your mind and think of this one thing, this thorn in the flesh, the picture that Paul is placing before us here.

[14 : 49] What do you think it would be like? Do you know what it's like to have a thorn in your own flesh, I'm sure? Do you know what it's like to get caught by a little stab of wood and perhaps remain unnoticed for some time?

And one of the things which the thorn, that stab in the flesh, would give you pain. You would experience pain from the thing that you have in the flesh.

And that same pain that you would experience from such, what shall I say, such a small thing, a thorn, you know, it can almost control everything that you're doing, if you understand what I mean.

Let me put it to you in this way. Suppose you were to set your hand to something and you've got this stab, this thorn in your thumb, no matter what you're going to try and hold in that hand, you know there is a throbbing sensation of pain, presence, at each and every occasion you try and use that hand.

Even supposing it was nothing more than to write a letter, if you've got this thorn in your flesh, it can become a painful experience, even to write a letter, such a small thing.

[16 : 20] Well, here is Paul, and what he is saying to us is, you know, us Christians, when I try and live my Christian life, what do I find?

I find this, that I am experiencing a certain amount of spiritual pain, if you like. There is a constant throbbing that is present with me in my spiritual life, something that will not let me progress, as I would want to progress as a Christian belief.

And then you follow it on from that. Not only does it cause pain and throbbing, but it causes the individual to become somewhat temperamental.

But, you know how when you're in pain like that constantly, even pain of body, let's imagine. And how it can lead you in such a way as that you don't want to meet with anybody and you don't want to speak to anybody, you're just, you're just concentrating, brooding over this one thing that is in your life, this pain.

You cannot think of anything else or anyone else properly. Isn't that the case now? that is exactly how the apostle was viewed. He is saying, here I am with this affliction and it leaves me sometimes so temperamental.

[17 : 54] It leaves me sometimes that I just don't want to see anybody and I don't want to speak to anybody, I just want to be left alone. I just want to be left to brood over my own affliction, my own situation.

It leaves me therefore sometimes even in a situation where perhaps I might lose my temper with those around me. Sometimes it causes that.

That is what the apostle is facing when he speaks of this affliction of being a thorny affliction. And you know how if the thorn in the flesh is left undealt with, how you can see it building up a poisonous substance round about it.

Can you not? If you were to leave it undealt with. And here is the apostle and he is saying to himself well, if it be a lust of the flesh and if it is left undealt with, Lord, thou knowest what the outcome of that is going to be.

And here I am, I'm trying to deal with it, but I don't know how to deal with it. Will you not help me deal with this? You see what the outcome is going to be?

[19 : 05] It's going to take over. And my whole Christian life is going to be a right mess if this is left with me. You understand? So that is the sort of picture he is building up for us when he says this is like having a thorn in the flesh.

But he describes it for us in another way. And he says to us, you know he says it is the messenger of Satan to buffet me. Here I am, a Christian and apostle of Jesus Christ.

What is it like being a Christian? This is what it is like. I am being buffeted every day of my life. Right, left, and center there is this one thing that is causing constant buffeting in my life.

When I was thinking along these lines, the picture that I got in my mind was this, maybe you can follow me, maybe the children perhaps can follow me here. You know the boxer, when he's training to go into the ring, in order to make a fight of it.

Have you ever seen these spring ball things that they have in training? Where there's a spring rising up from the floor, right, and on top of that, there's placed a large ball, and the boxer in training, he thumps that ball as best he can.

[20 : 40] Right? If you watch that ball, have you ever noticed what that ball is doing? It is springing back at the boxer, isn't it? If the boxer were to give it one there, the ball would just come springing right back at him, as if the ball were saying, how dare you hit me like that?

That is what the apostle is saying to us here. Here I am. I'm trying to fight this thing. And every time I try and hit it, or every time I try and strike a blow in Christian terms.

What happens? It just rebounds back at me, and it strikes me, it comes to me all the more powerful than it has ever been before.

So you see, he says, how things are with me, being a Christian. I try and fight my way through, but nevertheless, there is this thing that is always rebounding back on me.

Now, let me take all of that, point two, and let me put it into a small picture for your own selves, relating it to your own selves as well.

[22 : 02] Perhaps you have got some affliction in your own life. Perhaps it is a domestic affliction, an affliction in the home, an affliction in the community, an affliction from others, an affliction from an inward sin, or whatever it is.

And you're doing your very utmost to overcome this affliction. And the more you do to overcome this affliction, the more it becomes a thorn of pain in your very life.

The more it buffets you back again. The more it rebounds towards you again. As if it were rebounding in anger against the very fight you are putting up towards this affliction.

Do you know what I'm talking about? I'm sure you do this morning if indeed you are a Christian. Then let me go to point three. The way in which he confronts this.

And he tells us, well he says, you can understand from my words in verse 9 how I feel about it, in confronting it. You can see, he says, what the Lord is saying to me, my grace is sufficient for thee.

[23 : 19] Why? For my strength is made perfect in weakness. What does that tell us about Paul and the way he feels confronting this issue? He says to us, I'll tell you, I feel utterly weak confronting this situation in my life.

Utterly weak. He feels that he's tried everything and yet that nothing is working for him. That he is not able to control this thing, whatever it is.

That he has gone to all lengths, that he can speak of within reason, and yet no matter what he tries, it's still there, it's still causing pain, it's still causing throbbing, it's still rebounding back, it's still there.

And you see what's happening to him? The more he's fighting against it, the more he is weakened. See, it is quite natural, isn't it?

That the more you fight against something yourself, and you feel that you're not overcoming it in natural terms, how do you feel? You feel as if you're becoming weaker and weaker and weaker.

[24 : 43] Let me put it to you again in a small picture if I can, to explain the thing as basically as possible. Take yourself on a winter night, right?

You're caught in a terrible storm, and there is an absolute gale that is blowing. You're trying to reach home in the midst of this gale.

You know, no matter how much you put your shoulder into it, no matter how much strength you've got in these legs of yours, no matter how much you try and fight against this prevailing gale, what do you find?

That the gale is so strong that it will not let you progress, that it will not let you even take one step at a time.

It's almost bringing you to a stand still. See? And from there, what? The more you push into the gale, the weaker you're becoming in your body.

[26 : 01] The strength is slowly disappearing. Understand? That is exactly how Paul feels in dealing and confronting this issue in his life.

I've been fighting this and no matter how I fight it, it's not going away, but rather it's coming back with all the more strength and prevalence than ever before.

And what is happening to me is that instead of overcoming it, it's overcoming me. I'm just becoming gradually weaker in trying to deal with this problem.

Becoming weaker and weaker in my spiritual life. Then let me go to point four. The method that he adopts to try and deal with it in a sort of finer way.

What does he say? I besought the Lord, he says thrice. I besought the Lord thrice. What he is putting to us there is this.

[27 : 13] Right up until now, he says, I've been trying to overcome this problem, this affliction in my life. I've been trying to overcome it in my own strength.

And then it dawned on me, Paul, you're not going to be able to overcome this affliction in your own strength, whatever it is.

You've got to go to a higher element. You've got to rise above the ordinary. And you've got to go to the Lord with this.

You follow? Here's Paul coming to the throne of grace. He's thinking to himself, Paul, I've reached the point where I'm going to pray to the Lord about this.

I'm just, it's a pointless fight for me otherwise I've got to go to the Lord with this.

[28 : 26] Now that is the natural answer. Let me state that straight off here. It is the natural answer for any person who has an affliction is to go to the Lord with that affliction.

And so often you see, although it is the natural answer, it is the last answer that we come to. We try everything else before we try what is actually the most reasonable of all answers to our affliction.

Therefore he is coming to the Lord at the throne of grace and he beseeches the Lord for the removal of this thing. Beseeches the Lord for it.

Well, when he uses that word beseech or besought, I besought the Lord Christ. What he is saying to us is, you know, he says, when I try to pray about this, it wasn't just a matter of going on my knees and asking where, saying to the Lord, Lord, there is something here that is bothering and I want rid of it, and I want rid of it immediately, and then getting up off his knees and walking away.

No, these words are chosen by the Holy Spirit to carry a definite meaning, and this word besought carries its own definite meaning, and what it means is this, he is pleading with God, he is pleading with God, do something Lord, I'm desperate, I've reached a point where just I'm at my wit's end with this thing, do something to deal with this affliction that I have.

[30 : 33] And you notice, not only is he pleading the first time, but he goes away after pleading with the Lord, he goes away, and then he realizes, well, having pleaded with the Lord, what do I find?

It's still there, the same old thing, it's still there, there. Here comes the devil, and he says, what's the point of your praying then?

I thought this God of yours was a God who answers prayer, and there you are, you've been praying to God, and the thing is still there, the same old thing, with the same old face, is still there, Paul, what's the point of praying?

You see, when the devil comes to him like that, he goes a second time, and again he does the same thing, he pleads that this should be removed, and he comes back a second time, and he looks for some success and adventure, and lo and behold, the thing is still there, after having besought the Lord a second time, you can imagine how the man's going to feel, this is awful, it's terrible, and not even the Lord himself is answering my prayer regarding this, and so he goes back a third time, and again he does the same thing, he pleads with God, take it away Lord, I beseech thee, take it away, comes back the third time, and it's still there, not taken away, have you noticed, that there

Paul, when he went to prayer the first time, was prepared to wait to see if God was going to answer, and thrice over he did the same thing, he waited to see if God was going to answer, have you noticed, that God did not tire of Paul coming to the throne of grace, even though he came three times beseeching God for the same thing, God was not tiring often, at all, now the devil can sometimes come to you, and say to you, God is sick and tired of you, praying and pleading about the same thing all the time, God is fed up with you, God is not fed up with his own people's prayers, believe me when I say that, God did not tire of the apostle here, as he was coming like that, to the throne of grace,

[33 : 51] I want you to notice these two things in particular, and then finally, the answer that he receives, what does he get? My grace is sufficient for you, ah, but wait a minute, you see, before then, he receives another answer, this is given to you, why?

So that you will not be exalted above measure, God, see, here's Paul thinking to himself, the messenger of Satan, oh, that Satan would keep where he is in hell, and that he wouldn't be able to move out of there, that he were chained there absolutely, and that he weren't able to come out of there with anything, but then God, you see, permits this to happen, permits the devil to come out of hell, permits the devil to enter the world, permits the devil to tempt God's own people, and there are those that are saying, how can God allow such a thing to happen, how can God, who says he loves his people, permit the devil to leave hell, and to come and tempt God's own people, and then you're confronted with this answer, so that you would not be exalted above measure, see, here is this man, a great apostle of Jesus

Christ, a man who has had revelations and visions, a man who speaks of himself here in the earlier part of this chapter, as having been carried into the third heaven, and had heard wonderful things in glory, being spoken of, things he says, which cannot be uttered, do you know he says, I was in danger, in danger of being exalted with pride above measure, and so he says, the Lord saw it fit, to allow Satan to buffet me with this thing in my life, to keep self-doubt and under control, to keep me humble in his presence, I received this faith.

But you see, that is the reason as to why it came, God, but then you see there is the answer to it coming. What is it? My grace is sufficient for me.

My grace. Paul, you know yourself who you're dealing with. You're dealing with God. You're dealing with the infinite God.

[37 : 02] God. Do you think, Paul, that I don't care about you? Do you think that? Oh, I care a lot, Paul.

I care more than anybody else cares. Because I know you, and I know your circumstances. I know your affliction, but I also know this, that I'm not going to take away that affliction for this reason, not only to keep you humble, but to prove that my grace is sufficient for you.

To prove to you that my grace will enable you to go on, Paul. And irrespective of the struggle you've got in progressing onward, you're going to go on.

Because my grace will make sure of that. You come to me with this affliction, let me tell you, my grace, which never runs out, it is sufficient for whatever affliction, for whatever need, there is a sufficiency in God for whatever.

you see, Paul, the way it works, the strength that I have, or that I give you in my grace, do you know how it's made perfect?

[38 : 37] It's made perfect in your weakness. You've been telling me, Paul, that you've been struggling with this thing, that you can't get rid of this thing. You wait a minute.

My grace will be shown to you as a grace which is all sufficient to enable you to continue the fight.

Weakened as you may be, it is not going to be the victorious party in your life, that affliction, for my grace is made perfect in your weakness, or the strength of my grace.

I'll show you, Paul, I'll show you the strength of God, working in fighting against such an element, such an affliction, as you are experiencing.

Well, that brings us to the point where we are able, I think, to conclude that it was not a bodily affliction of the apostle is speaking of here.

[39 : 46] So God, when he says my grace is sufficient for you, is speaking about something far deeper than bodily affliction in life. He is speaking about the inward parts, as if to say, well, whatever, Paul, you've got to face up to, then I'll prove to you that my grace will be sufficient for that.

for my grace is to you. He says exactly the same thing to you who this morning are a Christian. To you who feel weakened, to you who feel fed up with the one thing constantly chasing you, to you is the message, my grace is sufficient for you.

For my strength is made perfect in your weakness. Go to him about it. Tell him about it.

Ask him, Lord, prove thy strength to me, for I am weakened in the way. prove that thou art able to bring me through this by the strength of thy grace.

Let us join together in prayer. Amen. O Lord, we ask of thee that thou wouldst enable us to take hold of the scriptures in such a way as that we will seek by thy grace to put them into practice and live in accordance with them.

[41 : 31] Strengthen us by thy grace amidst the weakness that is with ourselves that we might be able to go on fighting until the end, the end when we shall be perfected.

O Lord, how we sometimes want to his that perfection when the Lord is not ready yet to perfect us absolutely.

Help us then to wait patiently and to fight down by the grace of God until such a time as it is thy will to say to us, I am finished with you now.

I am ready to receive you into my glorious presence. And we ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen.