

Pentecost 6 7/5/15
2 Corinthians 12:1-10 9B

BUT HE SAID TO ME, "MY GRACE IS SUFFICIENT FOR YOU, FOR MY POWER IS MADE PERFECT IN WEAKNESS."

"If you have your health you have everything," or so the old saying goes. But, what if you are a Christian and you don't have your health? What if you have cancer, or emphysema, or some other debilitating illness? What if you are in need of a kidney transplant? Would you still have everything?

Does your contentment and happiness depend only on your outward circumstances? What if you didn't have the good job that you have? What if you promised at your wedding that you would love your spouse "for better, for worse," and you find yourself today in a marriage that is so bad you don't believe you can survive one more day? Under circumstances such as these, do you think you could still be contented?

The Apostle Paul had some problem in His life that caused him a certain amount of grief. He called it "*a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, a weakness.*" This thorn was serious enough that Paul begged the Lord three times to remove it. God answered Paul's prayer, but not the way Paul wanted it answered. Through this thorn, this messenger of Satan, this weakness, God taught Paul an important lesson in being a Christian. He answered Paul's prayer, "*My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.*" Like Paul, God uses our thorns, our weaknesses, to teach us that His grace is all that we need. When we have God's grace, we truly have everything.

It is a sad but true fact of earthly life that we will have bad things happen to us. We will feel pain -- physical, emotional, spiritual pain. And, there will be times when tears will fill our eyes, all because we live in a

world cursed by sin.

In 7 days, God created the perfect home for us. All was “good.” There was no curse of sin, especially no death. God did not want bad things to happen to us. God did not want us to feel pain. God did not want tears to fill our eyes. God wanted to simply enjoy the work of His hands. But, our first parents disobeyed God and brought the ruin and curse of sin upon us.

The fall destroyed the perfect home God created for us. The fall means that we live in a world of disappointment, heartache, sorrow, and loss.

The Apostle Paul in his life knew all too well the curse of sin. He tells that there was given him “*a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan.*”

In the verses immediately before the verses of our lesson, Paul tells us about himself, his life. We know from the books of Acts how Paul was a zealous Pharisee, killing Christians in order to silence the preaching of the Gospel. On the road to Damascus, the risen Lord Himself appeared to Paul and called him to be an evangelist, a messenger of this Gospel, to the Gentiles. Christ Himself then teaches the Gospel to Paul personally, even, Paul tells us, taking him into heaven to get a picture of the feast to come. Paul then goes on to tell us the price he has paid for the furthering of the Gospel with his own body -- beatings, shipwrecks, hunger and thirst.

Then, Paul begins the words of our lesson. “*To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.*”

What was this thorn? Was this thorn physical, mental, or spiritual? The best answer that we can have about the thorn is that we simply do not know what it is. We know nothing more about Paul’s thorn in the flesh than

what Paul himself tells us here in the verses of our lesson this Sunday.

The point that God is teaching us in the life of Paul is that this thorn was a source of constant irritation. Like a boxer punching a punching bag, that thorn continually beat upon Paul, so much so that it seemed Satan was about to score a crushing triumph.

Paul tells us, "Three times I begged the Lord to have Satan leave me alone." God answered Paul's prayer, but not in the way Paul wanted. God did not remove that thorn from Paul. Rather, God answered, "*My grace is sufficient for you.*" "My grace is all you need." Paul's thorn caused him to see his weakness, his pride, his tendency to trust in and exalt himself. In this way, God used that thorn, that messenger of Satan, to help Paul see that when He had God's grace, he had everything.

It is good that the Scriptures are silent as to exactly what Paul's thorn was. God wants us to see ourselves in Paul's example. God wants us to apply Paul's weakness to ourselves and our thorns.

"To keep me from becoming conceited..." Ever since the fall, the tendency of the sinful flesh is to fear, love, and trust in itself above all things. To remind us that we are weak, that from the dust we came and to the dust we will return, God sends thorns to humble us. God uses the thorns He permits to come into our lives to daily remind us that we are weak, but He is strong and His grace is all that we need.

When we have God's grace, we have everything. GRACE is best understood as God's Riches at Christ's Expense.

Our sin brought the wrath of God upon us. But, in His love, God poured all of His wrath against our sin not on us, but on His only-begotten Son. The Bible says it this way, "*God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them...God made Him*

who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him (Christ) we might become the righteousness of God (2 Cor 5)."

When we want to know what grace is, we look to the cross. Jesus took upon Himself all of our sin and carried them to the cross. There, He died as punishment for our sin. His blood flowed from His sacred wounds so that you and I would have full and free forgiveness.

As God poured out His grace on Paul on the road to Damascus, He poured out His grace upon us in the waters of our Baptism. By our baptism into Christ, we have been made one with our Lord in His resurrection and eternal life.

Yet, our sinful flesh continues to cling to us, that flesh which hates the Gospel and trusts in self. To teach us that we must daily return to the waters of our baptism to drown our flesh and rise to new life in Christ, God sends thorns into our lives. God in His love for us sinners wants us to learn to fear, love, and trust in Him above all things.

So, God allows Satan to inflict thorns into our lives, thorns which beat upon us and irritate us. Today, in our lesson, Paul calls his thorn "a messenger from Satan."

When our thorns irritate us, what is the natural reaction of our flesh? Is God angry at me? Is God punishing me? Why is God doing this to me? My Dear Christian Friends, let us understand this clearly: God is not angry at us. God is not punishing us. He punished Christ in our place, for our sins. No, by allowing Satan to inflict thorns into our lives, God is working good for us -- God is using these struggles to draw us closer to Him.

As we walk by faith, thorns are good for us! Thorns draw us closer to God. *"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."* Thorns teach us the truth of the words we learned in Sunday

School, "We are weak, but He is strong!" And that gives us hope, hope that God is always working good. Hope, that the glory of heaven awaits us. Hope that one day, all the struggles of earthly life will be over and God will wipe all the tears from our eyes.

God's grace is sufficient for you. Health, wealth, material things and prestige can all be lost or taken from us. But, when you have God's grace, you truly have everything. God pours out His grace upon us in our baptism. He continually pours His grace upon us through the hearing of the Word and with His Son's very Body and Blood so that the strength and victory of Christ may be our strength and our victory, even as the thorns of earthly life beat us.

God's power is made perfect in our weakness. Even in sickness, weakness, insult, hardship, persecution, difficulty, God's grace is all that we need. When we have God's grace, we have everything. If God is for us, who can be against us?

To God be the glory. Amen.