

What's Good About God: His Grace

2 Corinthians 12:1-10

A man died and went to heaven, where he met Peter at the Pearly Gates. Before he could enter Peter gave him a few questions to answer, telling him that he had to accumulate 100 points before he can go in. "So, how often did you go to church?" Peter asked. "I went every Sunday and Wednesday," replied the man.

"That's one point," answered Peter. "One point? Wow! I figured it would be worth more than that."

"And did you give any offerings?" asked Peter. "Yes, I gave 10% of all my income every week," answered the man. "Well, let's see," answered Peter, "that's worth 3 points. Did you do anything else?"

"Well, right off hand, I can't think of a whole lot. I did mostly what I thought I was supposed to do." "Well, we'll give you 5 points for good behavior, but can't you come up with something else?"

By this time, the man was completely flustered. He finally cried, "Well, I can't come up with anything else. It seems no one can enter heaven except by the Grace of God!"

And Peter said, "100 points! Come on in!"

The grace of God. It's one of the things that's good about God. It's the only way any of us get to heaven. It's the only way any of us can have our sins forgiven. It's the only way any of us can have right standing before God. Philip Yancy has written, "Grace comes free of charge to people who do not deserve it -- and I am one of those people."

And so are we.

From this passage in 2 Corinthians 12, we learn that we can know the goodness of God through His Grace.

But wait just a minute. Sometimes in our lives we don't feel very graceful, at least not in the sense we are using it today. And if we don't feel that way always, then when can we know God's goodness through His Grace? Let's look at two times.

1 We can know the goodness of God through His Grace when we encounter our weakness.

The Apostle Paul had a serious problem. He called it a "thorn in the flesh." Though the Scriptures do not tell us what that problem was, we are told that Paul prayed three times for God to remove it. He didn't, but God's answer to Paul provided him with something much more valuable. He came to realize that God's grace is sufficient to meet every need of life, and that the goodness of God comes shining through best in our weaknesses.

What was Paul's thorn in the flesh? That has been the subject of much speculation through the years, but no one has come up with an answer that completely satisfies everyone. Some say that Paul's "thorn" may have been temptations of some kind, and that gives comfort and meaning to people who are beset by fierce temptations.

Others say that Paul's thorn may have been the opposition and persecution which he suffered at the hands of his fellow Jews, and for those Christians experiencing persecution and opposition for their beliefs, this passage brings strength and endurance.

Some men who are experiencing difficulties at home may claim that Paul's thorn was his wife!

Paul's physical appearance has been thought to be that thorn. Some scholars claim that Paul was so ugly that his work in the Lord was hindered by the fact that people were repulsed by his appearance.

Paul may have suffered from eye trouble which caused him to have severe headaches. Remember that on the road to Damascus, Paul was struck blind by the glory of the Lord, and it is possible that he never fully recovered. In one place in Galatians, Paul commends the church for their concern, saying that if it were possible for them to do so, they would have plucked out their own eyes and given them to him.

And at the end of Galatians Paul writes, *“See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand,”* as if he were writing in huge characters, not being able to see very clearly what he was writing.

But probably the best explanation is that Paul suffered from a type of malarial fever that afflicted the inhabitants of the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. The word “thorn” in verse seven could best be translated “stake,” and when you think of how criminals were sometimes impaled on sharp stakes, you would tend to conclude that Paul suffered savage pain in his bouts with this “thorn in the flesh.”

A person who suffered from this fever speaks of the headaches that accompany the fever as being like a “red-hot bar thrust through the forehead.” Someone else has said that when the pain becomes acute it “reaches the extreme point of human endurance.”

Paul prayed three times for the Lord to take this pain away, but the Lord did not. Finally, God gave him an answer. It wasn't quite the answer that Paul was expecting. Instead of taking away the pain, God told Paul that His grace was sufficient for all of human needs.

It is probably a good thing that we do not know what the thorn in his flesh really was. A person who has trouble with headaches might tend to believe that Paul's thorn in the flesh was headaches. A person with a handicap might like to think that Paul was handicapped in some way. Someone who encounters persecutions and misunderstandings because of his faith in Christ might believe that persecution was Paul's thorn in the flesh. So it is probably a good thing we don't know what Paul's thorn was.

But whatever Paul's thorn may have been, Paul was assured of the sufficiency of God's grace. He discovered that it was in his weakness that he could truly see the goodness of God that He had shown to Paul through His grace.

Every day of our lives we are reminded of our weaknesses, and of the fact that we are only human. But one thing we do know: God's grace is sufficient for whatever need comes along in our lives. There is no problem, no weakness, no besetting sin

that is too big for God's grace to cover. Whether it be temptation, or opposition, or some physical, emotional or mental sickness, God's grace is sufficient for every need in our lives.

And it is at the time when you are really hurting, that God's goodness through His grace can best be seen. And the most wonderful thing about God's grace is that it comes to us when we need it most, when we are weakest. It is in our weakness that God's grace is shown to us.

But wait just another minute! It would be a sad story if the only way God made His grace known to us was when we were weak. That brings us to another way this passage in 2 Corinthians teaches us that we can know the goodness of God.

2 A second time we can know the goodness of God through His Grace is when we encounter God's power.

God was actively involved in Paul's life, just as He is actively involved in the lives of Christians today. And God wanted Paul to understand how powerful his Lord was. So God used Paul's weakness to reveal divine strength.

Only when Paul experienced his own weakness did he know God's power. He was just like a lot of us today. He had pride, too. He was proud of his accomplishments and the things he had seen. And like many of us today, Paul was prone to allow those things to hinder his work for the Lord. You and I do the same things—we become so involved in our church activities that we become proud of them to the point where God does not have free access in our lives to do His work in our hearts. We soon begin to fool ourselves into thinking that we're not so bad after all. We may even love someone so much that we seem to think that that person is not so bad, either.

But God had a way of humbling Paul. He would simply remind him of his weaknesses. And when Paul encountered his own weaknesses, whenever he had a sharp spasm of pain, he came to know and experience personally God's power, a power which He makes available to every believer through His good grace.

And when Paul encountered the power of God through His grace, then he could come to the point where he could say that he was content with whatever hardships or pain or discomfort would come along.

That's why he could write just a few verses later, in 2 Corinthians 13:4, *“For to be sure, he [Christ] was crucified in weakness, yet he lives by the power of God. Likewise, we are weak in Him, yet by God's power we will live with him to serve you.”*

God uses our weaknesses to reveal His strength and power to us today. But it is only in our weakness, only when we are weak in ourselves that we can be made strong in God. We can look to the New Testament to find a few examples of how this works. When the disciples of Jesus encountered the storm on the Sea of Galilee, even these seasoned fishermen had to admit that their expertise and experience were no match for the fierceness of that storm. In their weakness, they finally called on Jesus, who was asleep on a cushion. Then, and only then, were they able to clearly see the power of God. Ask those disciples if God is good!

There was a woman who had been sick for twelve years and had spent all she had on doctors, but only got worse. One day she slipped through the crowd to touch just the hem of Jesus' garment. She had tried everything else and had to finally admit that she could not help herself. Then, and only then, did the power of Jesus go out from Him to heal her. Ask that woman: she knew that God is good!

One man had a son who was seized by demons. They had tried everything they knew to try. The father had taken the son many places in an effort to free his boy from the demons which filled his body. Finally, they heard about Jesus, and admitting their weakness and desperation, they went to see Him. It was when they took this step of faith that the boy was healed, and freed forever from the demons. Ask that father: there was no doubt in his mind that God is good!

When the disciples were utterly helpless to feed the thousands of people who had gathered to hear Jesus speak, in the very moment of helplessness, God's power came shining through. And Jesus didn't feed the people because they deserved a measure of His grace. He fed them because they didn't deserve it, and He is a good

God. That is what grace is. Ask anyone in that crowd who knew what had just happened: they'll tell you that God is good!

Peter once found himself in a helpless situation. He was in prison, and was considered to be such a dangerous criminal that two soldiers were stationed on either side of him while he slept. But even in that helpless situation, even in that weakness, God's power was shown when Peter was freed from the prison by the angel of the Lord. Peter will tell you: God is good, and that goodness is shown to us through the power of God which works in our lives when we are weakest.

God's methods remain the same today. He can use our weaknesses to reveal His strength in our lives today. But only when we are weak in ourselves can that strength and power be made known to us. It is not a strength or a grace that we deserve. We can't work for it. Strength over temptation, strength over our thorns in the flesh are made available to us through the grace of God. He sends it to us, delivers it personally, at the times when we need it most and deserve it least, in order that we might know Him, and that we might know by experience that He is a strong, gracious God.

And you'll discover that only when you are strong in God can you be content with whatever life happens to hand to you, or throw at you, through whatever paths God leads.

But the paradox of it all is that you cannot know the strength of God until you admit your weaknesses before Him. You cannot know that His grace is sufficient for your every need until you admit before Him that you are helpless.

When we encounter our own weaknesses, or when we encounter the power of God, we can know that God is good because of the grace He provides on both occasions. God's grace is fully sufficient for us today, and because of this one fact, we can know that God is good. What do we mean when we say that "God's grace is fully sufficient"? We simply mean that the grace of God will never be exhausted, that there is enough grace for every one of everyone's sins.

On the island of Trinidad there is a crater in an extinct volcano which is completely filled with pitch. This asphalt is hard enough for people to walk on, even though

here and there gas escapes in bubbles from its surface. Train loads full of asphalt are dug from this tar-like lake and used to pave roads all over the world, in every continent.

It is said that no matter how large a hole of asphalt is dug out, it fills back up within 72 hours. For over 100 years they have been taking shiploads of asphalt out of this crater, yet it remains full. They have gone down as 280 feet and still found this black, gum-like substance bubbling up.

The same is true of God's grace and forgiveness. It never runs out and never diminishes. No matter how terrible your sin, the forgiveness and grace is sufficient!

Today is the day you can know the grace of God, and knowing that, know also that God is good. What will your response be to this good news?