

Strength and Weakness

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- [0 : 00] Well, it's a great pleasure to be with you again. For God's message today, I've got six words, but I very much want you to hear them and to hear what I want to say about them.
- I'm getting a bit deaf, I think, in my old age. I spend my time saying what to everybody. And did I catch you right? So can you hear me right down there? Smile if you can, please, in the back row.
- It may be hard, but thank you. All right, then we turn to 2 Corinthians 12 and verse 9. I'll read the whole verse, but the sentence I want has only six words, and you probably already can guess what it's going to be.
- But he, that is the Lord, said to me, that is Paul, my grace is sufficient for you. And if you were brought up in the olden days like me with the authorised version, my grace is sufficient for thee.
- You may have done that as a memory verse. For my power is made perfect in weakness. My grace is sufficient for you.
- [1 : 09] I think you will agree with me that that's one of the very great promises and assurances by which a Christian lives. It, of course, is spoken here to the Apostle Paul, not to us, but by the providence of God and the inspiration of Scripture, it is spoken for us as well today.
- My grace is sufficient for you. I guess I must have preached on that about 50 years ago when I began in Christian ministry, but I'm not sure that I really fully appreciated or understood it.
- They say, don't they, I've been reading this week in the paper, that all MPs ought to have a second job so that they know what real life is about. I agree with that because some of them seem to live in a completely different world from us.
- And it's true to say in preaching that until you've lived for some years in real church life and indeed in evangelistic ministry and so on, you don't fully appreciate these sentences.
- You can preach on this when you're young and think it's true, but when you're my age and have been through all those things, it's even more precious. My grace is sufficient for you.
- [2 : 27] By the way, when I was young, I was told that grace means undeserved favor. I want to say that that is not adequate. Grace in the New Testament means undeserved favor and power, strength, operative power.
- The Hebrew mind would never have thought of God's favor that did not work out in somebody's life, in somebody's heart, giving us strength. And you can see that, can't you? My grace is sufficient for you for my power has made, my strength has made perfect in weakness.
- So grace in the New Testament is not only undeserved favor, it is strength that we don't deserve, but God gives us for the work we have to do. Now, as your minister has said, I have the privilege this week in taking a small part in the Cornhill training course.
- And I'm simply overjoyed to hear that the numbers have almost doubled. I'm not surprised, because I think it's a very valuable course. And I hope that all of you are right behind it in your prayers and so on.

I'm told there are a very lively lot, so I hope that I can keep up with them. I shall certainly need the grace and strength of the Lord to do so. One of the rules of the Cornhill training course, of course, is that the verse must be taken in its context.

[3 : 45] So in case there is a Cornhill student here that I shall meet this week, I must do this, lest they take me to task on Monday morning for not doing what I say. Now, the context, I hope you've got your Bible open.

It's very important that you should, because I want to look very carefully at the context. And the context is quite extraordinary in verses 7 to 10.

So will you put your eye on verses 7 to 10? And I'm going to give you seven extraordinary things. You know, in the ancient languages, as well as in modern languages, in order to make our point, we often double up, don't we?

We say, that was a very, very good meal. Or that was a very, very late train, or something like that. And so I'm going to say that these seven things are not just extraordinary, they're extraordinarily extraordinary, if that's grammar.

I'm not sure if it is or not, but I'm going to say it anyhow. So first of all, the extraordinary, extraordinary reason given for the thorn in the flesh that we're reading about this morning, and that's verse 7.

[4 : 54] Paul says, to keep me from being conceited because of the surpassingly great revelations there was give me a thorn in the flesh. Now, I find that quite extraordinary.

Don't you, verse 7, the beginning, to keep me from getting a swelled head. It's almost bizarre, isn't it, in the view of the end of verse 6, when Paul says that he doesn't want anyone to think of him more than is warranted.

He's the most humble of man, isn't he? In the letter to the Corinthians, he says, what is the apostle? He's but a servant, a steward. So here we have a humble man, and yet God has purposes to see that these extraordinary revelations being caught up into paradise, do you see that in verse 4?

That's about him. That because of these, Paul might become proud, might become arrogant. Now, I find that extraordinary.

And I think the reason must be because of the Corinthian situation itself. You know that the Corinthian church was the most infantile and troublesome of all the churches that Paul planted.

[6 : 06] And they're famous for their boasting. Apparently, for no reason, they regarded themselves as superior to Paul, some of their leaders, and certainly superior to other churches.

So my guess is that Paul is putting this here. It's true, of course, that God did say this, and God did want this. But Paul records it for the sake of the people he's writing to.

He's saying, in effect, that I am a true apostle, and God is going to keep me humble, and that that is the mark of the true leader. And that in order to do this, because of my exceptional revelations, some that nobody's had before or since, God gave me this thorn in the flesh.

Now, isn't that an extraordinary thing to say and to read? That Paul might not get a swollen head, God has to act drastically. Secondly, I want you to notice in verse 7 the extraordinary pain that was Paul's lot, this thorn in the flesh.

It must have really hurt. We are told that the thorn was like a stake used in torture. Well, that's in the news recently, isn't it?

[7 : 28] And sometimes in executions. So what is clear is that what God allowed him to have was really torture.

We say somebody's got a crippling migraine. Well, obviously, it's far more than that. So I'm going to suggest to you that this was an extraordinary pain that was almost unbearable.

So please, in our conversation, don't let's trivialize the thorn in the flesh and say my daughter-in-law is my thorn in the flesh or this room in which I work or my boss is a thorn in the flesh.

We do tend to talk like that, don't we? That's out of the question, isn't it? We're talking about something here really serious. Extraordinary pain. Thirdly, will you notice the extraordinary instrument that God used?

There was, give me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan. Well, we know God is in control and we know from the book of Job that God does use Satan to fulfill his own mysterious purposes.

[8 : 39] But I think Satan, who's already, we know, active in Corinth, we get that in chapter 11, verse 14, through some of the leaders, these deceitful workmen who are masquerading as angels of light and Satan is behind that.

But here, Satan is allowed to make a direct attack on the person of the great missionary. Well, I reckon that was an opportunity he'd longed for, to make a direct attack on this great missionary who'd brought the gospel, had liberated people from Satan's power throughout the eastern Mediterranean, and now Satan has given a permission to give him a knockout blow.

Fourth, will you notice the extraordinary prayer, verse 8, three times I pleaded with the Lord.

I dare say that meant extensive, intense, and passionate requests from his heart. If it was just three times, it reminds us of Gethsemane, an even more terrible occasion.

You know, it's important, isn't it? Just flip back a page. Will you do that in your Bible? I've got the NIV, but I think it'll be the same in whatever Bible you have.

[9 : 59] And if you look at chapter 11, you will be sure that Paul is no wimp. Just look what he went through. I sometimes come back to this, and I marvel that the Apostle Paul is still alive.

Verse 23, flogged more severely. chapter 11, verse 24. I can hardly read it. Five times I received from the Jews the 40 lashes minus one.

39 lashes multiplied by five. Have you ever seen that on the telly when in Iran, and it happens in those sort of nations, people are put up against a frame and lashed, and that happened to the Apostle five times.

Apparently sometimes people died under that, you really wonder how this man survived, how his body stood up to it. And no wonder therefore he cried out.

It isn't as though he hasn't suffered. Look at all the things in verse 25, 26, 27. And then on top of this, it's as though it's the last straw. It's as though it's the last straw.

[11 : 07] I can bear all these things that I've had to undergo. I can bear those imprisonments, those stonings, those lashes, but not this. And then look at the extraordinary answer to the prayer.

But he said to me, and if you want to put that in one word, no. And the perfect tense here stands for a final decision, valid once and for all.

No, don't come back to me again. That is final. There'll be no reconsideration. Now most Christians, and I speak for myself, have known God to answer no.

And it can be disconcerting, it can be disappointing, it can shake you, and I dare say that has been your lot at times. Here it is a clear-cut no.

God has made a decision. Just remember, to whom he's saying no. He's saying no to his great apostle, who's opened up the world of the day to the gospel.

[12 : 17] He's saying no to the greatest writer in the New Testament, to whom we owe the greater part of the New Testament, Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, the pastoral epistles.

He's saying no to the great leader of the gospel evangelism of the Gentile world, which means us. The great example, the great teacher.

Is God going to make such a man have a burden even worse than he's carried already? Extraordinary. Extraordinary.

Extraordinary. Then we'll notice, sixthly, the extraordinary reaction. There's no sulking. There's no so-called dark night of the soul.

There's no apparent bewilderment. Look at verse nine. I don't know how your translation goes, but it says here in the NIV, I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses.

[13 : 19] I've been trying to think of the last time I boasted to someone about my weaknesses, and somehow it slipped my memory. And then verse ten. I delight.

Not just I'm content. I delight in weaknesses, in insults. Do you delight in insults? That was grand, wasn't it, what I said about your elder, Norrie?

I mean, supposing he'd come up here and Dr. Philip had insulted him. That would be out of the question, wouldn't it? And if you went up to afternoon and you said, I'm so sorry that this was said. It was quite out of court.

Oh, he said, I'm delighted. You know, it seems almost with the language of madness, doesn't it? And that brings us on to my seventh and final extraordinary thing, the conclusion of the whole matter at the end of verse ten.

The last sentence, that is intended, obviously, to wrap it all up. when I am weak, when I am strong. Now, please, do not get this message wrong.

[14 : 22] God is not saying, the Bible is not saying, God uses us despite our weaknesses. That is not the message. The message is that God uses us almost because of, and certainly in and through, our weaknesses.

I got thoroughly depressed in that first hymn. I don't know about you, 256. It's all about bitter, what was the bitter thing?

Bitter taste. And then, frowning providence. I really got quite depressed as I was singing it. And yet, it's a great hymn, isn't it? And the reason why it talks in that rather strange way is that William Cooper himself suffered nearly all his life from the deepest depression, which is a horrible thing to experience.

And in that weakness, living there with, near John Newton, as you probably know, he wrote these hymns which remain the treasure of the church. And in his depression, God used it to say, and to put on our lips, these words that go right to the heart.

However, this paragraph is so extreme, isn't it? Look at it again at the end, the wrap-up sentence, when I'm weak and I'm strong.

[15 : 39] It is so extreme that it hardly makes sense to us. And if you'll allow me to come from something that is sublime to something that is ridiculous, like Premier football, I want you to imagine the following conversation with a manager of a top team and I'm talking to him.

and I say, I gather you're playing Manchester United next Saturday. I'm very sorry, I say, to hear that you've lost so many of your good people who won't be fit for the game.

Here's the manager. Yes, he said, as a matter of fact, I've got three of my best players banned because of foul play and foul language. I've got one with a broken leg. Mind you, he managed to break the leg of the other guy as well.

I've got two of my best players who've lost form. I've got one really key striker who's in prison because of aggravated assault. So, Mr. Lucas, I think I'll have to play the youngsters this Saturday.

Lucas, well, you'll get a thrashing, won't you, Mr. Manager? No, says the manager, I'm hoping for a 3-1 win, as a matter of fact. Certainly, I'll be very unhappy with a draw.

[16 : 50] Me. How on earth can you hope for that? Oh, Mr. Lucas, don't you know, I found as a manager of a football team that, well, my theory is, you know, that when we're weak, then we're strong.

We fully expect to beat Manchester United. And that's just madness, isn't it? But that's the language here. When weak, then strong.

Now, of course, it is not strange to us because we know that the exalted Christ on the throne of heaven today was the crucified Christ.

And that in his greatest weakness, naked hanging on the cross, bearing the sins of the world, we have our redemption. The most powerful act in history.

So that when Christ was weak at his weakest, then he did that great work, which is the greatest work in the world and in history. Now, my friends, what I want to do now is to make some applications.

[17 : 56] We're always told the preacher should apply. Well, so he should, but so should the hearer, too. It's your responsibility to apply this to your own life and circumstances. And it may be that you will think my applications are really those that fit me.

Well, yes, indeed, I want to apply it to my life and I hope you'll apply it to yours. So I want to make a number of applications of this extraordinary promise that my grace is sufficient for you.

For you, sitting here, for me, standing here, this promise must be true. One. First application of this extraordinary paragraph I take to be this, that the conditions in which really effective Christian work is done will generally be like those in verse 10.

Let me repeat that because I think it's so important. The conditions in which really strong Christian church work is done will generally be like those in verse 10.

That is, the more successful, like Paul and his ministry, the more likely, and I've looked up these words very carefully in the original meaning, the more likely there will be weaknesses, insults, which could mean injury, hardship, which could mean, and C.K. Barrett translates it, anguish, persecution, and difficulties is a weak translation.

[19 : 30] It means distresses or calamities. No one in his right mind would choose that kind of life, would they? But that is what we choose if we join in Christian activity together.

That's what we choose if we want God to use us in the world. We expect that that kind of thing will happen. In short, calm seas, light winds, sunny skies, mad times be our privilege, as we challenge the kingdom of Satan, but much more likely rough weather, wind against us, and an occasional violent storm.

Indeed, if a Christian church doing its work as best as it can experiences always calm seas, it probably means that we're drifting and making no headway at all.

normal. So that's my first application. That if this is a pattern, then those who do work that God uses and blesses, those who extend his kingdom in a wicked world, will find things like insults and catastrophes and hardships normal.

second application. We know that we're saved by grace. That was beaten into me as a young Christian.

[21 : 03] But what this verse tells us is that we serve God through sheer grace. In other words, this promise, my grace is sufficient for you, is for life. It's for experienced, gifted, successful Christian workers.

It's for all of us. we didn't deserve to be saved and we don't deserve to serve. And this comes so often, doesn't it, in Paul's writings.

I'm sure you remember that great 15th chapter of Corinthians. You remember what he says in verse 9? I am the least of the apostles. I do not even deserve to be called an apostle because I persecuted the church of God.

No, nor did you, Paul. You had a wretched background. You did great harm to the church of God. Nevertheless, verse 10, but by the grace of God I am what I am and by his grace to me was, and his grace to me was not without effect.

I worked harder than all of them, yet not I but the grace of God that was with me. No conceit there. Application 3.

[22 : 15] God hates pride. Do you remember those words of the apostle Peter? God resists the proud and gives grace to the humble. Notice that.

He resists the proud. So the way to immobilize God's promise of grace for you day by day is to be proud. The Corinthians were proud.

Again and again they're accused of arrogance. In some ways it's laughable. They had nothing to be arrogant about. But nevertheless, they were. The Corinthian ideal of a leader was a powerful imposing person standing out for his own rights, performing signs and wonders, accepting adulation and monetary support from those he was able to impress.

Christian leaders like this, we're told, represent a permanent threat to Christianity and this is written on every page of church history. I think it's very, very difficult for churches at least denominations not to be proud as the Corinthians were.

First, there was ecclesiastical pride. The Corinthians were proud of their church and looked down at the other churches in Romanatia and so on, Greece. I believe that's true officially of the Roman Catholic Church.

[23 : 45] I'm not saying of Roman Catholic people, of course, but the Roman Catholic Church in its beliefs is arrogant. It says that its own priestly ministry is the only valid ministry of the gospel.

It denies that any Protestant ministries are true Christian ministries and how God has humbled them. it really seems, doesn't it, that endemic child abuse is a mark of the Roman Catholic priesthood in the 21st century.

Paul says in 1 Corinthians 5.1, I hear that, well, let me read the exact words because they are a stinging rebuke. It is actually reported there is sexual immorality among you, Corinthians, and a kind that does not occur even among pagans.

A man has his father's wife and you are arrogant. What we've seen in the Roman Catholic priesthood doesn't occur even amongst pagans. I wish you would have heard a taxi driver talking to me about it through the window.

He ought to be keeping his eye on the road, of course, but he got so excited he turned back and told me what he thought of it and how he'd lost all confidence in the church. What a tragedy incidentally. Pride humbled.

[25 : 01] ecclesiastical pride is found in most ancient denominations and it brings them ultimately to destruction. There was intellectual pride in Corinth.

They prided themselves on their wisdom. You'll find that at the beginning of 1 Corinthians. And intellectual pride has marked many of the modern liberal denominations. I suffered from it as a student at university.

Modern academic theological pride that denies many of the miraculous and supernatural events of the New Testament has destroyed the faith of many young men going into the ministry which has caused great harm to their churches.

So much so that the present Bishop of London has said openly that theological education should be done within the family of the church, not at university. I agree with him.

Intellectual pride destroys denominations. But it was their endemic in Corinth. Thirdly, there was spiritual pride in their gifts, especially the gifts of prophecy, tongues and knowledge.

[26 : 10] Paul is devastating in his criticism of spiritual pride, especially in 1 Corinthians 13. Can you imagine more cutting words than these? If I speak in the tongues of men and angels, but have not love, I'm just like a resounding gong or clanging cymbal.

And you know what he's talking about, don't you? He's talking about the gongs and the clanging cymbals of the pagan idol houses just down the road, and they're beating their gongs to drive the demons away and to invite people to their heathen worship.

So you're no better than a heathen if you're proud of your spiritual gifts. pride. When denominations are infected with ecclesiastical pride, intellectual pride, or spiritual pride, it is the beginning of the process of self-destruction.

Let him that thinketh he stands take heed. Your minister and I are fans of Ralph Davis. I find his writing very nourishing.

Here is Davis on the grace of God. Quote, Grace must always be the decisive and dominating factor in the Christian's practical theology.

[27 : 28] He or she must constantly confess that this success, this employment, this loved one, this health and strength, this meal is what God has given.

You will find it, he says, humbling, but it is the only thing that will keep you from worshipping yourself. A final application, and this one a quickie.

There are many more, and you may as you go home, and I hope you will talk about this great sentence, and apply it to your own life. Here is a little application. God does not always answer our most passionate prayers, and we can feel disappointed in him.

And of course it is because his ways are not our ways. I recall a time when our lunch, our services at St. Helens in the City of London were attracting bigger crowds than ever before.

There was no standing room, there was no sitting room, you could hardly breathe. And we were encouraged at that time to pray for a real spiritual movement in the City of London.

[28 : 39] London. And the answer, the next week, was a bomb from the IRA, which destroyed the inside of the church. It was a very bitter blow.

All was going so strongly, and for one and a half years, of course, we could no longer carry on those services in the city in the way that we had. But it was an enormous benefit providentially in the long term.

So when I meet Jerry Adams, I shan't be tempted to punch him on the nose, because so much good came out of it. But at the same time, I shall certainly not shake his hand, because two people were killed.

But if he would listen, which of course he wouldn't, I could tell him what God had done through it all, and that all of us at St. Helens at that time, discovered that this promise was true.

Six words, my grace is sufficient for you. Well, let's pray together. Our Heavenly Father, we come to your great throne through our Lord Jesus Christ, thanking you for Paul the Apostle, and the amazing achievements of his ministry, from which we benefit even today.

[30 : 09] We thank you that heavenly grace was sufficient for him, and therefore for us. And we ask that we may believe this, and live by it, and share the good news with others, for Christ's sake.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.