MY GRACE IS SUFFICIENT FOR YOU

(Spiritual Warfare II)

2 Corinthians 11:16-12:10

Key Verse: 12:9

“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.”

In today’s passage Paul continues to defend his apostleship. In order to do so, he shared his experiences of suffering for Christ and of having mysterious visions. Also, he told the Corinthians why he boasted about his weaknesses. The key verse of today’s passage is 12:9. “But he said to them, ‘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.” Let’s learn how Jesus’ grace is sufficient for us. Let’s learn how God works so that we can be useful to God and fruitful.

I. Paul boasts about his sufferings (11:16-29)

Look at verse 16. “I repeat: Let no one take me for a fool. But if you do, then receive me just as you would a fool, so that I may do a little boasting.” Paul knew that he was foolish to boast. But he did boast. Although it is not God’s way, Paul would boast in order that the Corinthians might discern between false apostles and true apostles (17-18). In verses 19-20 Paul rebuked the Corinthians’ lack of discernment in an ironic tone. They were willing to put up with disgraceful treatment. They were being enslaved, exploited, taken advantage of, and slapped in the face. Paul wanted them to have spiritual discernment for their own good. It seems that the false apostles regarded Paul as weak because he did not abuse people. Paul admitted that he was too weak for that (21a). Then he went on to boast in comparison with the “super-apostles.”

Look at verse 22. “Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they Abraham’s descendants? So am I.” Some Judaizers put great confidence in their Jewish pedigree. They must have boasted about their special privilege as God’s chosen people. God chose them, not so they could brag about it, but to carry out God’s mission humbly. However, they misused this privilege for their own benefit. We should not do the same.

Look at verse 23a. “Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) I am more.” Paul began to talk about how much he suffered for Christ. False teachers talked big about their standing as Christ’s servants. However, Paul points out that a true servant of Christ is not one who talks big, but one who suffers for Christ.

We can divide verse 23b-29 into two parts. The first part is about external trials (23b-27). The second part is about internal trials (28-29). Paul’s external trials came from hard work, persecution by both the Jews and Gentiles, a constant sense of danger, and bodily sufferings, such as sleeplessness, hunger and thirst, and being cold and naked. As God’s servant, Paul suffered a lot. Naturally, we tend to be frightened by such suffering, thinking, “Must I suffer like that as God’s servant?” We may wonder why God allowed Paul to suffer like that. We may wonder what the meaning of these sufferings could be. Usually people try to avoid sufferings and live an easy life. This is our natural desire. Even Christians do not want to suffer. Is it possible to live in this world without suffering? No, it is not. When we look at people, everyone is suffering. Mostly, we suffer because of our own sins of greed, selfishness, pride, laziness, lustful desires, and so on. That suffering has no meaning. It only makes one miserable and leads to destruction.

However, Christian suffering is different. It has meaning. It makes us grow and shapes us to be like Christ (Ro 5:3,4). Before knowing this truth, Peter tried to seek glory without suffering. However, when he knew the meaning of suffering, he encouraged the suffering Christians, saying, “Rejoice rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed” (1 Pe 4:13). Sufferings for Christ are a guarantee of future glory. Wow! Thank God for many missionaries around the world who are participating in the sufferings of Christ in many ways. Those who are serving in Muslim countries feel a constant sense of danger, wherever they go, sensing that they can be attacked at any moment. Many who are in Africa, Asia, the CIS and Latin America suffer from malnutrition and diseases without proper medical care. Many in America are suffering daily because they must work hard to support themselves as well as to share the gospel. The degree of suffering may be different, but everyone suffers. Since we must suffer, let’s decide not so suffer for our sins, but to suffer with Christ (1 Pe 4:15-16).

Why are sufferings always a part of Christian life and service? 2 Timothy 3:12 says, “In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted….” John 15:18,19 says, “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you.” People persecute Christians because they fear that their own evil deeds will be exposed (Jn 3:19-21). Their hatred of Christians is irrational. We must know the meaning of suffering based on God’s word. Also, we must have a right attitude toward suffering. We should not try to avoid suffering. Rather, we should confront sufferings with Christ, so that we may also share his glory.

Paul also suffered from internal trials. Look at verses 28-29. “Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?” This trial was unique to Paul because he pioneered many churches and carried the pressure of his concern for them. He was especially concerned about weak people and those who had been led into sin. To the weak, Paul had the compassion of Christ. But to those who were led into sin, his heart burned with holy indignation. It was not to destroy them, but to save them. He did not compromise by ignoring their sin problem. He dealt with sin in order to liberate them from its power. Paul loved God’s flock, whom Jesus bought with his blood, with holy love. Like Paul, many of us have internal trials, but not to the same degree as he did. Still, in addition to our own sufferings and trials, we carry the burdens of our spiritual children as well. In doing so, we suffer. Thank God for this suffering.

II.  Paul boasts about his weaknesses (11:30-12:10)

In this part, Paul boasts in a way that is different than what the world does. Many people boast about their success, their achievements, their husbands or wives, their children, and so forth and so on. They think that if they do not boast, they will be ignored and lose the joy of life. However, since each person is busy boasting about himself, he does not hear others’ boasting. Nevertheless, one’s arrogant boasting damages others, leading to alienation and isolation. The main root of their boasting is pride. The Bible says that God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. Pride is Satan’s stronghold. So Paul boasted about his weaknesses. This reveals God’s power and encourages others. Everyone has weaknesses to boast about, if they are honest and willing to do so. But without faith, it is impossible.

First, Paul boasted about his weaknesses based on facts (11:30-33). Most people boast about their strengths. Such boasting is often enhanced by exaggeration and even lies. At the same time, they try to hide their weaknesses, for fear that exposure will result in being despised and rejected. However, Paul boasted about his weaknesses. He gave a specific example to verify his truthfulness. Look at verse 31. “The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, who is to be praised forever, knows that I am not lying.” As we can see in the book of Acts, Paul had gone to Damascus pursuing Christians to arrest and kill them. But he was arrested by the Risen Christ. The light of the Risen Christ shone in his dark heart and revealed who he was and gave him a glorious mission as an apostle to the Gentiles. Paul was totally changed and began to preach the gospel right away. Then the Jews began to persecute him to stop him from preaching the gospel. Paul hid himself in order to avoid persecution. However, many guards were blocking the exits from the city so no one could escape. They really wanted to catch Paul. Yet Paul, with the help of some fellow Christians, Paul was lowered in a basket from a window in the wall and slipped through the governor’s hands. Paul must have been embarrassed. In this situation, he could do nothing except pray and depend on God and receive help from his Christian coworkers. He was weak. In the previous section Paul boasted about his sufferings for Christ. He sounded like a powerful five-star general. But here he seems to be a coward, and weak, like a bird in a cage. He became “basket Paul.” In this way Paul told the facts of how God rescued him from an embarrassing, dangerous situation.

Second, Paul boasted about his weaknesses based on his vision (12:1-6). False apostles shared their mysterious visions as grounds for claiming spiritual authority. Paul boasted about his vision in order to silence them. Once, Paul experienced a mysterious vision. He was caught up to paradise. He must have been led by the Holy Spirit. So he did not know whether he was in the body or out of the body; only God knows. For the last fourteen years he said nothing about this vision. Usually people who experience such a vision will brag about it. Many like to boast loudly even about their mysterious dreams. A mysterious spiritual experience can deepen our personal love relationship with God and convince us of God’s calling. Also, it helps us to have hope in the kingdom of God as we live as holy pilgrims in this world. Furthermore, it can give us spiritual desire to do God’s work. However, there is a danger that those who experience them can become proud and self-righteous. Then they can judge others and despise them, neglect the word of God, and pursue only mysterious experiences. Some want to receive direct revelation from God through isolated prayer, perhaps on a mountain. In that way many people have become cult leaders. In order to have sound faith, our faith should be based on the word of God which is already God’s full revelation. Because of these possible dangers Paul didn’t boast about his mysterious experience. He mentioned it in the third person, as though talking about someone else (5). He said in verse 6, “…so no one will think more of me that is warranted by what I do or say.”

Third, Paul explains the meaning of boasting about his weaknesses (12:7-10). Look at verse 7. “To keep me from being conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.” Many scholars talk about what the thorn in his flesh was. They have suggested many things: perhaps eye damage from the brightness of the light of the Risen Christ. The word “thorn” shows that he must have suffered from it continually. The word “messenger of Satan” reveals that his disease did not come from natural causes. It was inflicted by Satan within the bounds of God’s permission (rf. Job). Why was this given? To keep him from becoming conceited. Many people who experience mysterious revelations suffer from spiritual pride. They can overcome their human pride. But it is very hard for them to overcome spiritual pride. That is why many cult leaders became cult leaders. They could not overcome their spiritual pride. But God loved Paul so much. So he allowed him a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan. We have a tendency to become proud when we receive God’s blessings. At those times, our enemy is not outside, but inside; it is pride. Therefore, whenever we receive God’s blessings, we have to fight against our inner pride and learn Jesus’ humility to the core. Otherwise, we become useless.

The thorn was so difficult for Paul that he pleaded with the Lord three times to take it away from him (8). People usually complain against God when they have such a thorn, thinking that God gave it to them. So when they are tormented by thorns, they doubt God’s love and allow bitter roots to grow in their hearts. They complain that God does not love them and ask why God would allow them to suffer. Yet Paul did not doubt God’s love or have a bitter root in his heart. Instead, he went to God and humbly asked God’s favor. Can you guess how he prayed? Perhaps he said, “Have mercy on me, Lord. I am afraid that my sickness may discredit your glory. Please heal me so that I can serve you better.” However, God did not remove the thorn. God interpreted the meaning of the thorn.

Look at verse 9a. “But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’” Here we learn two things. In the first place, God’s grace is sufficient for us. Sometimes we complain, as if we did not receive any grace from God. Sometimes we think that God’s grace for us is not enough and that we need more grace. So we pray, “Oh, Lord, give me more grace.” But when we think about God’s grace deeply, we realize that God has poured out his grace on us abundantly. He has given us the grace of forgiveness of sins. In the past we suffered from guilt, shame, sorrow, fear, and anxiety. We also suffered from the power of sin; we could not stop sinning. Some had continuous headaches or could not sleep well. Still others suffered from despair or alienation without direction or hope for the future. We could not escape from this power of sin and death. But God had mercy on us and saved us through Jesus’ atoning sacrifice. On the cross, Jesus forgave all our sins and gave us eternal life and a living hope in the kingdom of God. Jesus enables us to live as holy pilgrims. God also gave us the grace of mission. Mission from God is a great privilege for us. Man was created to do God’s work. We cannot feel happiness or the meaning of life unless we find a proper and meaningful mission. God gave us the most valuable and precious work to do. It is life-saving work. There is no more noble work than this. If we do not have mission, we cannot maintain God’s grace and will be like a spiritual couch potato. We did not gain this glorious mission by our own merit; it was given to us solely by God’s grace. God’s grace is sufficient for us. We have no reason to complain. We have a clear reason to be thankful to God always.

Here we also learn that the thorn is suffering, and suffering itself has meaning. In the past Paul did not know the meaning of his thorn in the flesh. But he learned that God gave him a thorn in the flesh so that he might not be proud spiritually. Also, he could participate in the suffering of Christ. In addition, through this suffering he could experience the power of resurrection. People say that they will be happy if they have no sufferings or troubles or pains. But that is not true. Through sufferings we can meet Jesus all the more personally and experience his resurrection power all the more. That is why the psalmist says, “It was good for me to be afflicted, so that I might learn from your decrees.” (Ps 119:71) He also said, “Before I was afflicted I went astray. But now I obey your word” (Ps 119:67).

In the second place, we learn God’s way of working. Jesus said, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” God reveals his power, not through man’s strength, but through man’s weakness. When man is strong, he does not depend on God, but on his strength. But when man is weak, he humbly depends on God. Then God can reveal his power through man’s weaknesses. For example, when father Abraham was one hundred years old and his wife Sarah was barren, God revealed his power by giving them a son at that time. When Moses thought that he could save Israel by his own strength and wisdom, he was rejected by his own people. So he was driven to the desert and received wilderness training for 40 years. He spent all his time taking care of his father-in-law’s sheep. He became so humble that he could embrace all kinds of sheep, including rebellious sheep. He became a humble man, the most humble man on the face of the earth (Num 12:3). When he realized that he could not do anything in his own strength and wisdom, God called him and gave Moses the marvelous mission of delivering his people. Charles Spurgeon suffered from gout. Sometimes he was so weak that he could not even stand. In those moments God gave him the Holy Spirit and great power to deliver his words to people. When Dr. Alan Wolff was somewhat proud, he tried to compete with Northwestern students and failed. But after receiving humbleness training in Maryland and in other ways, he began to depend on God. Later, he got a good job at Northwestern University. He helped over 40 UBF members to obtain proper jobs. He returned to Northwestern and finished a Ph.D. for the glory of God.

Look at verse 9b. “Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me.” After realizing God’s way of working, Paul’s attitude toward thorns was completely changed. Now he wanted to boast about his weaknesses all the more gladly so that Christ’s power might remain on him. In verse 10 he said, “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.” People boast about their strength, wisdom, wealth and success. They don’t want to expose their weaknesses, failures or poverty. But when Paul realized the true meaning of his weaknesses, he could boast about his weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and difficulties for the sake of Christ. He participated in the suffering of Christ and experienced the power of resurrection. We don’t need to fear our weaknesses or hide them. Our weaknesses are the opportunity to come to Christ and experience his power.

May God help us to realize that God’s grace is sufficient for us. May God use each of us when we come him in our weakness.