

Graduation Sermon, 2005: Jesus Promises His Sufficient Grace

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2 Corinthians 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.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ Jesus:

We live in interesting times, as the saying goes, interesting times for our synod. And if you understand that little saying correctly, you know that it's not a completely happy thought. Interesting times are times full of news. And times full of news can be times full of trouble, times full of difficulty. Church mission offerings are not keeping pace with rising budgets. Budgets must be cut. Will we have to recall more missionaries? Downsize working training? Will there be enough calls for our graduates? Then there are even more fundamental questions one hears, such as, "Is our church beginning to lose its way? Are we losing our mission spirit? Have we lost our sense of purpose in Christ?"

And all this talk from these interesting times has had an impact, a very personal impact, on you graduates. How could it not? And it wouldn't be strange if once in a while you were a little anxious, sometimes, maybe, more than a little discouraged. "Why does it have to be this way? Why can't things be easier? Why does my class have to go through this? Why can't the way ahead be more clear?"

It reminds me of a Peanuts cartoon I read long, long ago. Lucy says to Charlie Brown: "Sometimes I get discouraged." And Charlie Brown offers her the little platitude, "Well, Lucy, life does have its ups and downs, you know..." "But why?" Lucy shoots back, "Why *should* it?! Why can't my life be all 'ups'? If I want all 'ups' why can't I have them? Why can't I just move from one 'up' to another 'up'? Why can't I go from an 'up' to an 'upper up'? I don't want any downs! I just want 'ups' and 'ups' and 'ups'!"

The cartoon wouldn't seem, funny to me, I think, if there weren't a lot of truth in it. The fact is that's how I'm inclined to think, too. That's how we're all inclined to think. Which makes your choice of text, your class verse, such a tremendous verse to choose for these interesting times. By your choice you make it clear that you don't want platitudes: you want God's good word—the only true take on reality there is.

And here is the truth: sometimes *God wants us to be weak*. God wants us to be weak so that we can know his power. Because right there in that narrow space where there seems to be no way out; right there in that time of trouble, of trouble and sorrow, where you're conscious only of your need and completely overwhelmed by want, right there Jesus is near, and he promises. He promises his grace.

Jesus Promises His Sufficient Grace

I. Sufficient for your life

II. Sufficient for your ministry

Sufficient for your life

Just before he relates Jesus' promise to us, Paul speaks of how he had been going through an intensely personal struggle. He speaks of it as a "thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me." It really doesn't matter what the problem was. It was probably some kind of physical problem. But it was more than that. Paul also calls it "a messenger of Satan to torment me." Which is to say: the physical ailment was causing Paul mental, emotional, and spiritual torment as well. Satan was using the problem to mount an assault on Paul's faith.

That's how it always is: in times of trouble, the devil wants to get us to focus on the trouble, to make problems in our personal lives loom so large that they're all we can see, they're all we can think about. He'll hide all the promises of God's Word from us so that we're tempted to give up. He'll tempt us to reason from what we see and experience rather than from God's Word.

But Paul didn't fall into despair. Instead, he fell on his knees. He turned away from the trouble and turned to Jesus instead. Three times Paul called out to the one who is a very present help in trouble. Three times he pleaded with the Lord to take the problem away from him.

And Jesus answered his prayer. Only not in the way Paul expected. Instead of taking the problem away, Jesus gave Paul this remarkable promise to sustain him, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

It's the same as if Jesus had said, "Paul, I'm not going to take this struggle away from you. No, I'm going to let you go on feeling weak—not because I want to torment you, but because I want to give you a better gift, something far better than a temporary fix for trouble. My grace is enough for you. Through my pardoning grace, my willingness to go to the cross for you, you have come to know the power of my unquenchable love. And the power of that grace can only reach its full strength in you when you are conscious of nothing but your own personal weakness."

God likes to make something out of nothing. Luther once said that if you think you're something, there's not much he can do with you. What happens in our personal struggles and through our sense of weakness is so very beneficial to us in our life of faith. We understand—not only with our head but also with our hearts—the power of sin. We see how much of our own plans and purposes are filled with our own big fat egos, and our desire to accomplish our own self-centered will instead of God's good will. Weakness strips us of our egos. Weakness teaches us to give up on ourselves. It really is true to say that, sometimes, God gives us his best gifts when he doesn't seem to be giving us anything at all.

Because there, right there, we see the power of grace. "*My grace*" he says. That is: not some generic grace. Some generalized feeling of mercy that floats down from some sunny sky when all the warm spring breezes blow. This is a located grace: found in Jesus and in him alone. It's the sufficient grace of our strong Lord who walked into the darkness of sin and death. It's the sufficient grace of a Savior who himself was willing to be weak for our sakes. It's the grace of a Savior who surrendered his will to die for love of God and us. It's the grace located at that tree where Jesus became a curse for our sin. It's the grace of his empty tomb where God gives us the heart to believe that we are now God's own dear children, forgiven and well-loved.

Will that be sufficient? It's more than sufficient, because it breathes with a love that is stronger than death, a love that is far more powerful than any enemy that might stand against us. It's the grace that teaches us to believe that in any struggle we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. That, in Christ, there's no crucifixion we can ever experience that will not end in a resurrection. That's the grace you learned to know more deeply here, my brothers, as you studied his Word, and that's the grace that you will take with you when you leave: sufficient to last you all the days of your life. It is also sufficient for your ministry.

Sufficient for your ministry

Jesus' promise of grace is sufficient not only for your personal lives. It is also sufficient for you in your ministries, however you may serve him and wherever you have been called. (And even if, for a little while, he asks you to serve him by not having an assignment.)

We all know that people are very interested in the subject of pastoral leadership these days. Congregations want men with good relational skills, men who have the ability to cast a vision for the future, men who work well in equipping the saints and then who can set them loose for service. "Give us men who are bold: who know where the church needs to go and who are unafraid to lead us there." Now I certainly hope that we have not neglected these practical aspects of your training here (although we would all admit we can always do better). We've certainly emphasized the need for planning, for any pastor to listen to and work together with God's people, to be bold in confessing the truth and to take the lead in reaching out to others.

But I'm sure that graduates still wonder, just as I wondered when I was sitting where you are: "Am I up for it? Do I have what it takes? After all, the responsibilities are so great—we're talking about the issues of eternal life and death here. The expectations that people have of me are so lofty, the demands are so huge—can I do it? Will my meager talents suffice in these interesting times? I feel so often myself like a little child who

knows not when to go out or when to come in. How will I ever lead others?"

That's why it's so important to recognize that Paul is not relating this personal struggle because it's sharing time and he wants to give those who might be curious a kind of glimpse into his inner life. He's really using himself as an example to give his people a better understanding of what evangelical ministry and evangelical leadership is all about. And he's talking about it to people who, quite frankly, were getting it wrong. They were approaching ministry from an all-too-worldly point of view. In their model everything was about the man—his pedigree, his talents, his abilities, his eloquence. The message came a distant second. The fact is: this is a sin we all fall into, the sin of thinking "the ministry is really all about me."

"You see," Paul says, "ministry is not so much about being the man with a plan, whose visions can catch him up to the third heaven. It's not so much about being the guy whose passion and drive will make things happen. Jesus made that clear by his answer to me. I prayed to be delivered from that thorn because I thought of all the things I could be doing for Jesus if only I were set free from it. But he said to me: 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.'"

In other words: ministry is not about me. It's about him. It's not about my strength and abilities. It's about Jesus' strength, most perfectly revealed when he seemed so weak, so helpless, so powerless on the cross. It's about his strength made perfect in my own weaknesses and crosses. The message of Christ and him crucified, the message of Christ the suffering Servant—this message becomes the power and also the pattern for my ministry. His love drives me out into the all the world—to carry the power of his love in this human form so covered by weakness.

"Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me," Paul says. And so Paul does boast—often—in this same letter. He doesn't go on and on about all his successes. He talks freely about all the times when he was weak. He talks freely about his struggles. In the climax to one section like that, he says, "Who is weak and I do not feel weak; who is led into sin and I do not inwardly burn?" You hear a pastor who is carrying his people's troubles on his heart.

What a practical comfort this is for us all: to know that ministry is not about putting on your best game face, of going out there and never letting them see you sweat. Ministry is not about some quick and easy dream of success if we could only hit on the only right plan and come up with the perfect formula. It's about following Jesus wherever he leads. It's about living from his sufficient grace day by day. It's about learning to see the crosses that come our way in a whole new light. Far from being impediments to service, they help us all serve better by teaching us to live from God's grace alone. Far from being evidence that God has abandoned us to the world, crosses are a sign that we belong to the crucified one in this world, and are wearing (as Luther put it) the court uniform of the Christian.

I pray you never have a ministry where you become consumed by the thought that you can never talk about struggles or admit weakness because then people might think you're not up for the job or that you're a Christian leader of the second class. I also pray that we never become a church where we can only point to our successes and can never admit our weakness, a church where never is heard a discouraging word and the skies are not cloudy all day. If that happens, Jesus' power will find no room among us to make itself felt. It can never be made perfect in our weakness.

And will his grace be sufficient to sustain the life of the church? Jesus' grace is more than sufficient. It is rich and overflowing.

What part of himself did he ever hold back from his bride the church? He loved her and gave himself up for her. He cleansed her with the washing of water in the Word. He feeds her with his own body and blood, given and shed for the sins of the world. He daily speaks the loving words of forgiveness that bring pardon and peace to her heart. We are the church, and Christ has put his loving words in our mouths to proclaim them to others, to all who are far and all who are near, to as many as the Lord will call.

Brothers and sisters, this message of grace will be more than sufficient for us in these interesting times. His gospel will be our power in whatever weakness we may have, in whatever trouble we may experience. By the power of this Word, we know what our mission is. We're here to love others as he loved us. By this Word we will transform human hearts one by one. By this Word, we will turn the world upside down. By this Word

we won't just get by. We will triumph.

God bless you all as you carry that Word out into the world! Amen.