

Is God Enough?
II Corinthians 12: 5b-10
Farmville Baptist Church
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This morning we begin our series entitled, "Enough" by posing the question "Is God Enough?" When we are nagged by doubts, is God enough? When life is hard or when we are suffering, is God enough? When others oppose and work against us, is God enough?

The apostle Paul certainly knew his share of suffering and hardship, and in the passage we heard today, he was meeting some strong resistance. I can't help but wonder if Paul ever asked, "Is God Enough?" The passage that Elizabeth read a few moments ago has some pretty strange pieces to it, doesn't it? Let's set the words in a bit of context as we get started. In the letters to the Corinthians, we have Paul's half of a conversation with the church in Corinth. We know from other parts of these letters that there were some serious problems in the church. In this segment, two issues were brewing. First, some of the Corinthians so called Hebraizers, were suspicious about just how "kosher" Paul's teach was. In response to this, Paul lists his qualifications as a good Hebrew and Israelite.

The larger problem was that others were undermining Paul's authority so the Corinthians were being led astray by a group of so called "super apostles" who were rival missionaries to Paul. These super apostles had captured the imagination of the Corinthian church with tales of their visions and personal religious experiences in the spiritual realm. We're familiar with these types, aren't we? All we have to do is click on the TV to find modern-day super-apostles touting their own personal revelations and privileged relationships with God. One goes as far as to predict world events in the coming year based on the revelations he claims he receives from God.¹

Paul, who had his own profound religious vision was tempted to go toe to toe with the super-apostles, but he seemed to know that a "my vision is better than your vision" shouting match would only reinforce their argument that personal spiritual experiences are a valid basis for religious authority and leadership in the church.ⁱⁱ In these chapters, Paul is trying to convince the Corinthians that his ministry is qualitatively different and therefore superior to this rival band.

Now, let me be clear here. Some of us have had deep and profound religious experiences. These are valid and serve to deepen our faith. But they do not constitute a basis for authority over the church. Rather, in our case, as in Paul's, leadership and authority are granted by the way we live out our faith, the way we live out the gospel, in our everyday lives.

In the first part of his address to the Corinthians on these issues, which begins in chapter 11, Paul argues that he is in no way inferior to the super apostles, he goes as far as accusing them of deceitful work and "disguising themselves as apostles of Christ." Next, Paul shares his own resume if you will, listing his sufferings -- the beatings and imprisonments that have resulted from his service to Christ.ⁱⁱⁱ Then, he shares a testimony about a vision he experienced with a key difference -- he boasts of God, not of himself.

Then Paul's argument takes a surprising twist. Paul says, that to keep him from being too elated by these visions -- too full of himself if you will -- that a thorn was given to him in his flesh. He attributes the source of this thorn to a messenger of Satan, a theology that was common in his day. Paul seems to have believed that Satan was on the prowl with a scheme to thwart God's plan. The enemy is focusing in on righteous believers, hoping to lead them astray so that they will fall in status before God and fail in the work God has called them to. Paul sees

the thorn as a trap, a ploy by the enemy to sideline him from the work he is called to do. Fortunately, Paul sees the thorn for what it is, and refuses to let it sideline him^{iv}.

Although scholars have speculated for years about this thorn in the flesh, we have absolutely no idea what it was,

- Some suggest it might have been psychological ó some type of ongoing temptation or perhaps guilt over the way he persecuted the early church before his conversion
- Others speculate that it might have been an external issue ó perhaps the ongoing persecution he suffered or the resistance of errant churches and rival apostles
- Still others suggest it might have been a physical impairment ó perhaps an issue with his vision.
- Still others suggest that Paul doesn't name his thorn because the Corinthians, who know Paul, are already familiar with it.

Although we may be curious about Paul's thorn, it is not the focus of the story. It is more important to know that it bothered Paul enough that he asked the Lord to remove it three distinct times. (PAUSE) But it wasn't. (PAUSE)

I'd bet we can all think of things that we have asked God to take care of, and our prayers have not been answered in the way that we would have wished. Sometimes those prayers have been for ourselves, and sometimes for those that we love. But in either case, what we asked God to remove wasn't removed. Often this lets those doubts and questions creep back in like that rock in our shoe, doesn't it? Sometimes, if we're honest, it makes us wonder, "Is God enough?"

"God is enough" is the response that Paul gets in answer to his prayer for the thorn to be removed. In fact, he gets a two-fold assurance: the Lord's grace is sufficient and the Lord's power is perfected in our weakness. The sufficiency of God's grace is a basic conviction for

Paul, he writes of it often. Here in II Corinthians, Paul has been focusing on his own weakness as an avenue of God's power, and his emphasis is confirmed by God's words, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness."

Now, I want to offer another caveat here. Paul's thorn, which was intended for evil, was transformed by grace into an important reminder in his life – ultimately he saw it as a gift. Please hear me this morning – this does NOT mean that all chronic pain or debilitating illnesses should be viewed as a gift. Some thorns can and should be removed. To do less than remove these thorns ignores both justice and good sense. However, when we find ourselves with a thorn that remains, it is appropriate to reflect on how we can discover God's grace in our weakness and limitations.

Without the thorn, Paul could have easily fallen into the same trap that ensnared the super apostles, He could have been diverted from his urgent mission and become obsessed with his visions and how self-important they could make him feel. But that thorn, which the enemy meant for harm, was transformed and redeemed by God's grace.

Paul is clear here that God is not the source of his hardship, just as God is not the source of our afflictions. As we talked about during our series on Half-Truths, what we do see is that God is present, even in the difficult things that God does not cause. We see that the grace of God is manifest even through the afflictions that bring us – and God – grief and sorrow. For Paul, God's grace is as much a "given" as the air around him, it is a grace that prevails over sin, weakness, and hardships.^v For Paul, God is enough.

Owning and rejoicing in our weaknesses and hardships doesn't play well in our culture does it? On the one hand, some people over-boast of their problems, seeking sympathy or being proud of their humility. On the other hand, as Americans we are expected to pull ourselves up by

our bootstraps, engage that fierce individualism, and soldier forward. I'dl be the first to admit that what Paul is asking us to do is a challenge.

We struggle with this as individuals, but we struggle with it as churches too. The Church universal often forgets that Christ's grace is sufficient ó we have forgotten it almost every time we have sought to secure our existence by our own strength and influence, every time we ally ourselves with worldly power rather than allowing Christ to be revealed in our weakness.^{vi}

Garett Green reminds us that the ancient church, once the original persecution ended, all too quickly succumbed to the temptation to make itself powerful in the world, to present itself as spiritually superior to other religions. After Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Holy Roman Empire, the church in the Middle Ages sought to make itself the supreme worldly power, becoming as Karl Barth would call it ða witness to the glory of Western manö rather than to the grace of God. In the modern period, despite the efforts of the Reformers to recall the church to the gospel, we have too often yielded to the temptation to secure our place in the world through inappropriate exercises of power^{vii} ó the Colonial era is a painful reminder around the world of this grave error. In this last election cycle we found segments of the church tightly enmeshed with candidates in ways that crossed the line between church and state.

Today Paul calls us all as individuals, as congregations, and as the Church universal to remember that we are not to glory in our own strength, rather we are to remember that God's grace is sufficient for us and that's God strength is made perfect in our weakness.

Here at Farmville we have some weaknesses don't we? Our numbers have been declining ó both attendance and giving, for a long time. Over the years, we've gradually pulled back from some of the ways we've been present in the community and become too inwardly focused. Many of you have identified that we don't need to go back to ðnormalö after the

pandemic, because normal wasn't working so well. Some of these thorns are within our power to remove, and we have the responsibility to do so. For others we need to trust that God's grace is sufficient and that God's strength is made perfect in our weaknesses as we seek to re-awaken and look forward with anticipation to how God will manifest God's power in the next chapter of our life together. PAUSE

My prayer today is that we can claim with grateful hearts that God is indeed enough.

Amen.

ⁱ John McFadden, *Feasting on the Word, Pastoral Perspective*, p. 206.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, p. 208.

ⁱⁱⁱ Stephen A Hearn-Krill, *Feasting on the Word, Exegetical Perspective*, p. 207

^{iv} *New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*, pp 165-166.

^v John McFadden, *Feasting on the Word, Pastoral Perspective*, p. 210.

^{vii} Garrett Green, *Feasting on the Word, Theological Perspective*, p. 208.

^{viii} *Ibid*, 210.