

SUFFICIENT

2 Corinthians 12:7-10

When I was in University there was a weekly radio show that I enjoyed. Each Sunday I drove just over an hour to get to my tiny, rural congregation that I served and almost every Sunday, on the way home, I would listen to a show called "A Prairie Home Companion".

It was a variety show, with musical guests, the occasional commentator, skits and all of the normal stuff of radio long gone, but every week we would get an update on the home town of the host.

We all want to be like the citizens of storyteller Garrison Keillor's fictional town of Lake Wobegon: "Where all the women are strong, all the men are good looking, and all the children are above average." Sounds pretty good, doesn't it?

I couldn't help but notice that in a recent poll that included North America and all of Europe, eighty per cent of men rate themselves as above average athletically, intellectually or physically, because we know that nobody-- [especially men] --wants to be thought of as below average--in ability, in social status, in how we look, in what we've accumulated or what we've accomplished. I might add the pollsters were wise enough NOT to ask women the same questions...

Which got me to thinking...I wonder how much of the time we strut around with one intent--to convince others that we are, at least, above average.

Now the reality is that if anyone had the right to claim "above average" status, it would be the apostle Paul. He was an intelligent and ambitious man, a graduate from one of the best universities in the world. He was persuasive, a leader in his community, a man who could communicate powerfully with his voice or his pen.

Before his conversion to Christ, Paul was a passionate persecutor of Christians. After his conversion, he became the most influential Christian evangelist in history.

God gave him visions and miraculous powers. In Acts 19: 11-12, we read, "God did extraordinary miracles through Paul, so that even handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched him were taken to the sick, and their illnesses were cured, and the evil spirits left them."

In fact, Paul could have been the first Christian celebrity, on a par or even better than the Christian rock stars and televangelists today. He could have taken his show on the road. If he had been smart--if he'd only had a good business manager--he could have made big bucks selling prayer cloths and pamphlets on how to live the "victorious" Christian life.

But Paul didn't take advantage of these opportunities.

You and I say, “Way to go, Paul. We don’t like those televised religious hucksters, anyway.” Those are the people who are not above twisting the faith for their own financial advantage. So, “atta boy” Paul! We respect your integrity

HOWEVER, surprisingly, though, Paul was criticized for not cashing in. Can you imagine that? He was criticized for his humility and his authenticity. Some claimed that if he really WAS that faithful he would be making money or seeking prestige.

In today’s reading passage, Paul responds to criticism from false prophets in the Corinthian church. Now remember the Corinth church: a problem church that had already had arguments over “whose gifts were better/more important”. A troubled congregation that had been told by “other prophets” that once saved, they could do anything they wished, no matter how mean, low or evil and it would be OK.

They suggested that if Paul were really from God, he would brag about his visions and miraculous powers. If he were truly God’s man, he’d be tooting his own horn, or turning a profit. Surely, he wouldn’t be such a “poor and common” man.

Sounds surprisingly contemporary, doesn’t it?

Paul replied that though he has had awesome visions from God, “nothing is to be gained” from boasting about it. In verses 7 through 10, we learn what separates Paul from the false prophets:

“To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations,” Paul writes, “there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. 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. 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.”

(Keep that one phrase, “My Grace is sufficient”...in mind.)

Until the end of time, theologians will debate what Paul’s “thorn in the flesh” was. No one knows. When Paul writes “there was given me a thorn in my flesh,” he uses the same verb form for “was given” that he uses in other places to indicate that he had received a special favor from God.

How could Paul view his suffering as a special favor? How could he possibly delight in this thing that tormented him? How could he possibly write that he

delighted “in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties.”

Paul trusted God. He knew his life was in God’s hand. Maybe that is why in Romans 8 he could write, “all things work to the good of those who love Him” (v. 27). “All things.” What a radical statement.

All things.

Not some things. But all things. Even a thorn in the flesh. So using Paul’s example, let’s give some thought to ways we can re-define our lives so we see the challenges in our lives as a positive, and not as a negative. Now for the next few moments I need for you to put on your thinking cap. Use your imagination. How can we re-define the negative qualities of our lives as positive qualities?

Let’s start with this: the negative in our lives destroys our illusions. This is a hard teaching but stay with me. The negative stuff, the suffering destroys our illusions. Most of us are under the illusion that our primary purpose in life is the pursuit of our own happiness. My life is all about me and my desires, me and my agenda, me and my self-actualization.

Then something comes along that doesn’t fit in with our plan: a divorce, a diagnosis, a death, a disruption. And as our perfect self-centered world disintegrates right before our eyes, we wonder where to turn. It is then we realize that the world isn’t built around us and our desires. It is a beautiful world, a wonderful world, but it is not a world that caters to our every whim.

A self-centered life is small and miserable life. What the world deems success is, ultimately, not very fulfilling. The bad things, the hard times, the suffering demolishes our illusions and points us in the direction of true peace and fulfillment. So, what’s one positive thing we can say about it? It destroys our illusions about life. Here’s another.

Suffering, hard times, the negative destroys our happiness. Wow, the lesson gets even harder! Suffering takes away our happiness. Can that ever be good? Possibly. When we are happy, we tend not to engage the world around us, not interact with the problems of the world. In fact, when we are happy, too often we don’t yearn for God.

Pay close attention now:

I’m happy because my team won the championships
I’m happy because I got the big promotion
I’m happy because I’m in love.

But what happens when the team doesn’t win, when you’re passed over for the promotion, when your spouse says, “We need to talk”? Does your happiness fly out the window? Sometimes it does. What, then, is left? That depends what you’ve got in reserve.

Many people who have suffered great tragedies discover that when happiness is gone, joy and peace, which have been there all along, but which have been masked by the desperate need to be happy, begin to emerge.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a Protestant pastor who was imprisoned and eventually executed by the Nazis during World War II. From his prison cell, Bonhoeffer wrote letters full of faith and hope. This is a quote from a letter he wrote to his sister: "I think that God is nearer to suffering than to happiness, and to find God in this way gives peace and rest and a strong and courageous heart."

Happiness is not dependent on God's presence. Hitler and Charles Manson probably experienced moments of happiness. But did they ever know true joy, hope, peace, or strength? I doubt it.

Remember Paul's words in Romans 5: 3-5. ". . . we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance produces character; and character produces hope. And hope never disappoints us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us."

This is a hard but important lesson Paul is trying to teach us: the hard times, the negative, the suffering can be positive if it destroys our illusions and takes away our shallow happiness, for these may be keeping us from God.

But there is one thing more all this bad stuff does for us. **Suffering makes us desperate.** This is getting heavy. Suffering makes us desperate. And this, too, can be a good thing, because that's when God enters into the situation. Actually, it's more like when we become willing to allow God to enter the situation.

It is when we are at our weakest that we call on the greatest power in the universe. It is only when we are completely broken and overwhelmed by our situation that we finally give up and let God *be* God.

Have you ever been at a point where, even if you could pray, *all* you were able to pray was: "God, have mercy"?

Listen to how God answers Paul's prayer. God says, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." That verb "made perfect" can also be translated as "carried out" or "completed." God's power is completed in our weakness. And then we find, as the apostle Paul wrote in Philippians 4: 13, that "I can do everything *through him* who gives me strength."

Notice that God did not promise to take Paul's thorn in the flesh from him. All God said was, "*My grace is sufficient.*" Paul would never be overwhelmed by his thorn, he would never be undone by it, never scandalized by it. God's grace was sufficient.

When I taught at both the University of the Air Force and for the State University of New York one class I taught was Philosophy. In it I would always teach the difference between “necessary” and “sufficient”. In brief, something is necessary if it contributes to a larger whole. Sufficient means it is enough by itself. Nothing else is needed.

It’s not by accident that God’s words to Paul were simple and to the point: “*My grace is sufficient.*”

The apostle Paul was surrounded by threats, persecution, and suffering. How did he endure it? He got lost in the wonder of God, the sufficient grace that supported him through all the times of his life, good and bad, in joy and in suffering.

“*My grace is sufficient.*” That, my friends, is a pretty good prescription for anything that happens to us in life.