

“When We’re Discouraged”

1. Remember the sufficiency of God’s Grace

2. Remember the power of God’s Grace

⁷ To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. ⁸ Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. 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. ¹⁰ 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.

Once upon a time it was announced that the devil was going out of business. He was going to sell all his equipment to anyone willing to pay the price. On day of the sale all the tools of his trade, Envy, Jealousy, Hatred, Malice, Pride, Idolatry, and many more were attractively displayed. Each tool was marked with its own price tag. Over in the corner by itself was a harmless looking, wedge-shaped tool. It was much worn, but still it bore a higher price than any of the others. When someone asked the devil what it was, he answered, "That is Discouragement." "And why" the person asked, "is it priced so much higher than the others?" "Because," replied the devil, "it is more useful to me than all the others. With discouragement I can pry open and get into a man's heart when I cannot get near him with any other tool. Once inside, I can use him in whatever way suits me best."

It’s just a story, but doesn’t it hit home? It is so easy to fall prey to discouragement. It is so easy to get down on ourselves. And you know where the devil really gets to us as Christians, he leads us to discouragement about spiritual things, things related to the kingdom. First, he shows us all the phenomenal opportunities – the children that need to be trained for life long service to Christ, the neighbors that need to be evangelized, the messed up lives that need to be changed, the talents that need to be harnessed for Christ, the teenagers whose lives need to be guided by Christ – the devil shows us all these phenomenal opportunities and then he shows us ourselves. He reminds us of what weak, frail, sinful people we are. The result is that we feel defeated and discouraged before we ever begin. Here we are people whom Jesus calls “the Light of the World” and yet we’re feeling more like victims of burn-out.

It is because those feelings are so prevalent among Christians that we want to use this page out of the life of the Apostle Paul to remind us what to do WHEN WE’RE DISCOURAGED.

1. REMEMBER THE SUFFICIENCY OF GOD’S GRACE

You see, Paul knew what we are talking about today. At one point in his life he was discouraged, really discouraged. And he tells us why. He was plagued by what he calls his “**thorn in the flesh.**” We aren’t told what it 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.**” In other words, 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 the way the devil works, isn’t it? In times of trouble, the devil wants us to focus our attention only on the trouble. He wants to make the problems in our lives loom so large that they are all we can see, all we can think about. He will hide all the promises of God’s word from us so that we are tempted to give up. He will tempt us to conclude that what we see and experience is more real than what we read in God’s word. But discouraged as he was, Paul did not despair. Instead he dropped to his knees. He turned away from the trouble and turned to Jesus. Three different times he pleaded to the one who invites, “**Call upon me in the day of trouble.**” Three different times he asked the Savior, “Please remove this thorn from me.”

And Jesus answered Paul's prayer, but he answered it in a way that Paul never expected. He didn't give him what he asked for but he did give him something better. Instead of taking his problem away, our Savior gave him this remarkable promise to sustain him. Jesus said, **"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."**

Stop for a minute and think of how beautiful God's answer was to Paul's prayer. He assured him of his grace. Can you think of a better antidote to discouragement and feelings of inadequacy than to be focused on God's amazing grace? Grace by definition is God's undeserved love, but sometimes we rattle off that definition without really thinking about what it means. Grace means that our Lord loves you and me even though we are unlovable. Even though we stand before God covered from head to foot with the muck and mire of sin, he still loves us. He loves us to the degree that he was willing to come into our world and suffer the hell we deserve for our sins. Grace means that he loves us so much he did that. Grace means that for Jesus' sake our sins are forever forgiven and forgotten. Grace means that there is nothing you or I could ever do to make Jesus stop loving us; that he is on our side in every temptation and every trial, through every fear and every frustration; that he will never let anything really hurt or harm us. Grace means we are never alone no matter how lonely we feel; that we are never helpless no matter how weak we feel; that we never have reason to despair no matter how depressed we get. Grace means that heaven is open for us no matter when we die and that we have a wonderful eternal future beyond imagination. Grace means that we have been led to believe all of this.

That message of God's grace was enough to lift Paul's spirits and keep him going even with his thorn in the flesh. And it can do the same for us. If we're feeling discouraged and down, if we're thinking that the Gospel light in our lives is little more than a smoldering wick about ready to go out, then maybe we need to remember that we too are the objects of God's forgiving grace. Isn't that why God gave us the Bible? This entire book with its message of a Savior who lived and died for us is meant to convince of God's grace. Isn't that why God gave us Baptism? That wonderful sacrament of Baptism that, in the past four months has folded Henry Horn, Joshua Stover; Milana, Miriam, Martel and Isaac Nichols, and Rosalyn Gurney into God's family is meant to convince us of God's grace. What did those people do to become children of God? Nothing! But through water and the power of his Word God reached into their hearts and said what he has said to you and to me, "You are an object of my grace." Isn't that why God gave us Holy Communion? Its whole purpose is to bring the message of God's undeserved love for us into our hearts and lives.

2. REMEMBER THE POWER OF GOD'S GRACE

But God's grace did more than lift Paul's spirits; it empowered him for the Lord's ministry. Remember that's why Paul wanted to be rid of his thorn in the flesh? He wanted to be a better pastor, a more effective missionary, a better servant of Christ. "If only I didn't have this trouble, I could do so much more for the Kingdom." That's why the Lord's answer is so beautiful, **"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."** With those words the Savior was saying, "Paul, I'm going to leave that weakness with you, not because I want to torment you, but so that you learn that your effectiveness in the kingdom, your value as a missionary, your power as my servant is not dependent upon you. It is not dependent upon your health, your physical abilities or strength, it is not dependent upon you period. It is dependent upon my grace. As long as you have my grace you have all you need. It is my forgiving grace which will fuel your life and empower your ministry."

Did Paul learn the message the Lord wanted to teach him? Listen again to the way he closes the chapter. He says, **"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 what I am weak, then I am strong."** Paul was saying, "I learned my lesson. I'm

not strong when I'm relying on myself. I'm just a weak frail sinful human being, but I am strong when I'm relying on the forgiving power of God's grace."

We need to learn that lesson too, don't we? Sometimes we get discouraged because we forget how much God loves us, how certain his grace is. And sometimes we get discouraged because, like Paul, we start to think that everything depends on us. But that is not true for us any more than it was for Paul. Martin Luther once said that as long as we think we're something, God can't do much with us. So in his wisdom God lets us see our weaknesses. He lets us see our inabilities. He lets us realize how we're no match for Satan and his temptations. He lets us see the power of sin in our lives. He lets us see that we are frail human beings who are slowly but surely walking towards the grave. When God does that he has a purpose. He is teaching us to give up on ourselves and to rely instead on him and his powerful forgiving grace. He is teaching us to understand what the hymn writer meant when he said, "In every condition, in sickness, in health, in poverty's veil or abounding in wealth, at home and abroad on the land, on the sea, the Lord the Almighty, your strength, e'er shall be." (Christian Worship 416:2)

I once heard someone say that Biblical Christianity takes a very pessimistic view of human beings and a very optimistic view of God. I like that. When we look at ourselves what do we see? We see people with limitations. We have limited ability, limited patience, limited love, limited energy and limited time. We see human beings who are sinners, people who can never get it right, people who can't go through a single day without blowing it in one way or another. We hurt the people around us, we fail our friends and family members, we get ourselves into no win situations. We see people who are dying, who are growing older and weaker and frailer by the decade. Does it sound discouraging? Yes, until we look at our God. We see a God whose grace is so powerful it can take weak, cowardly, untrained men like the disciples and turn them into worldwide ambassadors for Christ. A God whose grace is so powerful that it can take a man like Paul who was determined to stamp out the Christian church and turn him into the greatest missionary the world has ever known. We look at our God and we see sufficient grace to cover all of our sins. We see a grace so powerful that it has instilled in us selfish human beings a desire to serve him, a grace so dynamic that it has moved people in this congregation to open up their pocket books, their hands and their hearts to support Gospel ministry. We look at our God and we see a grace so powerful that Jesus promise to build his church will be fulfilled in us, through us and in spite of us and all our weaknesses. I don't care how weak you are or how weak you feel. I don't care how many thorns in the flesh you can name. I don't care how discouraged you have been or how low the wick in your spiritual life may be burning – you still have God's grace and because of that grace you still can say, "When I am weak then am I strong, grace is my shield, Christ is my song." Amen.