

Place: Lurgan 8:1:2017

Reading: 2 Corinthians 12: 1-10

THE MARVELLOUS MY'S OF THE BIBLE

2. MY GRACE

Thomas Edison was America's greatest inventor. One day when Edison was just a boy he was experimenting with phosphorus on a moving train when the phosphorus burst into flames and set the train car on fire. The conductor slapped Edison on ears and threw him off the train. Edison said later that when the conductor hit him he felt something snap inside his head and his deafness started from that time. In later life Thomas Edison became almost totally deaf but he said he did not mind so much because it helped him concentrate. *His handicap proved to be his greatest blessing.* Philips Brooks was a peerless New England preacher, but Brooks did not want to be a preacher, he wanted to teach school. But when school teaching did not work out for him, he turned to the ministry and found his life's work. Booker T. Washington was a born a black slave, coped with his hindrances and handicaps and became the greatest educator among black people that America has ever known. Frequently Washington spoke about "*The Advantages of Disadvantages.*"

Now history is replete with the biographies of people whose lives have been interrupted by one thing or another. But learning to cope with these interruptions they lived nobly and successfully. Paul had to cope with

life's interruptions for he says in (12:7) "*there was given to me a thorn in the flesh.*" Was he alone in this ? Saints, apostles, prophets, martyrs, answer, "**no.**" You see, the Lord knows how to balance our lives. If we have only blessings, we may become proud so He permits us to have burdens as well. Do you recall Paul's experience here ? About fourteen years prior to the time of writing this passage Paul was granted a never-to-be-forgotten spiritual experience. (Acts 14:19-20) An experience so wonderful, so ecstatic, that he was not permitted to divulge all that he saw and heard. God honoured Paul by granting him visions and revelations, and by taking him to heaven. The interesting thing is that Paul kept quiet about this experience for fourteen years. And during those years he was buffeted by "*his thorn in the flesh,*" and perhaps people wondered why he had such a burdensome affliction.

The Judaizers may have adopted the views of Job's comforters and said, "*This affliction is a punishment from God.*" Actually, it was a gift from God. Some of Paul's good friends may have tried to encourage him by saying, "*Cheer up, Paul. One day you'll be in heaven.*" Paul could have replied, "*That's why I have this thorn I went to heaven.*" Or perhaps there were some in Paul's day as are there are today who believe that an afflicted Christian is a disgrace to God. "*If you are obeying the Lord and claiming all that you have in Christ,*" they say, "*then you never will be sick.*" Do you ever hear that sort of talk ? Yet I have never found that teaching in the Bible have you ? It's true that God promised the Jews special blessing and protection under the Old Covenant. (Deut 7:12) But He never promised the

New Testament believers freedom from suffering and sickness. My if Paul had access to “ **instant healing**,” because of his relationship to Christ, then why didn’t he make use of it for himself and for others such as Epaphroditus ? (Phil 2:25) “ *Paul why don’t you claim your healing as one of your redemption rights ?*” What do you think Paul would have replied ? My he would have said as he still says in this passage, “ *For this thing I for thee.*” (12:8-9) Now I want to talk to you this about “ **This Marvellous My**,” this Notice,

(1) THE PROBLEM THAT CHALLENGED PAUL

Paul says “ *there was given to me a thorn in the flesh,*” (12:7) Now we don’t know what Paul’s thorn in the flesh was. He does not tell us, but that has not stopped others from guessing. Calvin said, it was “ *spiritual temptations,*” Luther “ *temptation and spiritual persecution.*” Others have said it was Paul’s physical appearance, his eye sight (Gal 4:5) epilepsy, migraine or malaria. Some think it was Satanic opposition. Whatever it was, it was a real problem. Isn’t it easy for us to think that great Christians have no problems ? I mean here in the heart of this greatest of all Christians there lay a problem that seemed to defy all solution, a pressure that to Paul was almost unbearable. For as we consider Paul’s problem we notice,

(a) THE PAIN OF IT:

He calls it “ *a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan*

to buffet me.” (12:7) In the Bible there are two kinds of thorns that are described. There is the word (akantha) which speaks of a thorny shrub. The Book of Hebrews speaks of “ *that which beareth thorns and briars,*” (6:8) This is the kind of thorn that you would find on a cactus or rose bush. Then there is the word (skolops) which is used only once in the Word of God right here in our text. It speaks of a sharp stake, such as used to make a fence. Sometimes the word was used of a wooden stake that impales someone to a tree or cross. Here is the picture that Paul is painting. He says there was given to me a stake that nailed me to the wall and nailed me to the floor. Do you see how he describes this thorn ? In its origin it seemed Satanic for Paul calls it “ *the messenger of Satan,*” (12:7) In its object it seemed to be a major hindrance in his life and ministry for Paul calls it “ *the messenger of Satan to buffet me.*” (12:7)

The word “ *buffet,*” is a strong word that means “ *to beat with the fist.*” This was the way the thorn was being used by Satan. It was used to afflict him. To buffet, and batter him. It is significant that Paul does not identify his thorn in the flesh. Some people say they know Paul was married because it says he had a thorn in the flesh. My whatever this thorn was, it was acutely painful. Now here is a man who was totally dedicated to the Lord. He was on fire for the Lord. He was on the move for Christ. He had sermons to preach, he had letters to write, and he had trips to take and yet in the midst of it all he says, “ *there was given to me a thorn in the flesh.*” (12:7) Do you know anything of this kind of situation ? Is there in your life the pressure

of some sore trial ? Have you been thinking, “ *If only the pain could be relieved, if only the health could be restored, if only my husband were keen, if only my congregation were responsive, if only I had a different job, a change of spouse ? If only ?*” To Dr. Alexander Whyte the famous preacher, the fact that he was an illegitimate child was a lifelong thorn but how greatly it developed his sympathy and enriched his ministry. What is your personal thorn ? Perhaps it’s a physical weakness, a heart complaint, a bodily deformity ? Maybe it’s a temperamental weakness, a mental handicap, an unsympathetic home, a rebellious teenager, a mistaken marriage ? Whatever that thorn is do you feel that it is limiting and restricting your usefulness for the Lord ? (a)

(b) THE PURPOSE IN IT:

For when unpleasant things happen to us we naturally ask why ? Well, twice Paul says, “ *lest I should be exalted above measure.*” (12:7) Or as A.T. puts it, “ *in order to prevent me becoming absurdly conceited.*” It would have been easy for Paul to say, “ *To me, has been granted wonderful revelations of glory. No-one has been privileged to enter into glory as I have been. I have been permitted to see and hear things that no one else knows nothing about.*” Do you see the great danger that dogged the footsteps of this greatly gifted, blessed, and used servant of Christ ? The danger was simply that of pride. Nothing tends to inflate a man with a sense of his own importance as the possession of great gifts and the enjoyment of unusual experiences. “ *Lest I should be exalted above measure.*” Why after taking Paul to

heaven did he allow Satan to buffet him with a thorn in the flesh ? God did it to keep Paul useable. God does it in your life to keep you useable. My there is nothing that will so disqualify you from God using you than spiritual pride. I wonder is there is a special area in your life that God knows to be in need of special care ? It may be that there is something lacking in your character, something that could endanger your witness, effectiveness and usefulness. But always behind the pain and pressure there’s the purpose of a God of perfect love, wisdom, and power.

*My life is but a weaving between my Lord and me
I cannot choose the colours, He worketh steadily
Oftentimes He weaveth sorrow and I in foolish pride
Forget that He seeth the upper and I the under side
Not till the loom is silent and the shuttles cease to fly
Shall God unroll the canvas and explain the reason
why The dark threads are as needful in the Weavers
skilful hand, As the threads of gold and silver, in the
pattern He has planned.*

Have you recognised the divine purpose in your thorn ? Has it been given to keep you lowly ? To make you live in humble dependence on God ? To drive you to the throne of grace ? This was Paul’s first reaction wasn’t it ? ? You see there was not only a (a) (b) there was,

(c) THE PRAYER FROM IT:

Paul felt the thorn must be dealt with and the only way to deal with it was to remove it altogether, so he went into the presence of the Lord and cried, “ *Lord take it*

away.” (12:8) Paul’s prayer was **Definite**: “ *I besought might depart from me.*” This thing was a hindrance and in the mind of Paul it had to go. Paul’s prayer was **Fervent**: “ *I besought.*” Literally, “ *I begged,*” Paul agonised over the matter. Paul’s prayer was **Repeated**: “ *For this thing I besought thrice,*” He was prepared to ask, seek and knock. My have you been praying earnestly about your trial ? Have you the same conviction as Paul about your thorn in the flesh that you would be better off without it ? It has simply got to end or your whole life as a believer will be spoiled, your testimony and usefulness for God will be ruined ? “ *Lord take it away.*” Is that how you have prayed, are praying ? “ *Lord if only I were stronger in body, if only my partner was a 100% for you, if only my circumstances in life were easier. Lord, if You would put me in a different situation. Lord, I could be a much better Christian.*

Some of teenagers are praying, Lord I could serve You better, if You would change my parents. Lord, if You would move me to another town, position. Lord if only ! Was Paul’s prayer answered ? No, yes, which ? Both. It was gloriously answered not according to “ the letter,” it is true but in way which has brought blessing otherwise impossible to Paul and to millions of others. “ And He said unto me, my grace,” (12:9) It is a true paradox that God sometimes answers our prayers by not answering them. Monica the mother of St. Augustine, begs God that her son may not go to Rome with all of its idolatry and immorality, yet God allows him to go and there in the very place which has been dreaded Augustine is converted to Christ. Is this not

sometimes God’s method ? We ask for strength that we might achieve, we are made weak that we might obey, we ask for health that we may do greater things, we are given infirmity that we may do things better, we ask for power that we may win the praise of men, we are given weakness that we may feel our need of God, we ask for all things that we may enjoy life, we are given life that we may enjoy all things. (1)

(2) THE PROMISE THAT CHEERED PAUL

For through this thorn God was able to minister grace to His stricken servant. “ *And He said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee.*” (12:9) It was as though the Lord was saying, “ *Paul I’m allowing the thorn to remain, but I want you to understand now that each moment there’s ample provision for your need, for my love in action is sufficient for thee.*” My this was a message of grace. What is grace ? ***It’s God’s provision for our every need when we need it.*** Now in the Christian life we get many of our blessings through transformation, not substitution. You see, when Paul prayed three times for the removal of this thorn he was asking God for a substitution. He was saying, “ *give me wholeness instead of sickness.*” Now sometimes God meets the need by *substitution* but more often not He meets the need by *transformation*.

The Lord does not remove the affliction but He gives us grace so that the affliction works for us and not against us. “ *And He said unto me my grace is sufficient for thee.*” You see, when God doesn’t lighten the load, He adds the extra ingredient of His all sufficient grace. A

man was walking by a big grandfather clock one day. He saw that heavy weight on the bottom. He said, “ *My what a heavy weight it is for that clock to bear.*” So he just goes over and lift’s that heavy weight and pulls it away. The grandfather clock says, “ *Why did you do that ?*” The man says, “ *I just felt sorry for you having to carry that heavy weight.*” The grandfather clock said, “ *Oh, please put the heavy weight back, that is what keeps me going.*” My sometimes God keeps us spiritually up by keeping us physically down. Paul “ *My grace*” I want you to notice here,

(a) THE WHO OF THIS SUFFICIENCY:

Do you see the Lord’s **PERSONAL CONCERN ?** The Risen Lord speaks directly to His tested servant revealing His tender concern. “ *And he said unto me.*” (12:9) My who but the absolutely Divine Christ could say this ? As Dr. S. Baxter says “ *These words involve omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, the possession of all the Divine resources, the perfect knowledge of all human needs, and Christ’s perpetual presence everywhere with His people.*” Tell me, have there been times when some agony has wrung from your heart the cry, “ *Does Jesus care ? Why has this trouble come ? Why is this pressure not removed ? Why is my prayer not answered ?*”

***Does Jesus care when my heart is pained,
Too deeply for mirth or song
As the burdens press and the cares distress
And the way grows weary and long***

My do you realise that He is personally concerned for you ? Henry Moorehouse returned home one morning carrying a parcel, a present for his wife and was greeted by his lame daughter who asked that she might have the pleasure of taking the present to the room where her mum was. “ *But you know dear, that you cannot carry it,*” said her preacher Dad, thinking of her lameness. “ *Give it me and see,*” she challenged him. So the parcel was handed to his lame daughter, and then she said “ *Now I’ll carry the parcel and you carry me.*” My if you must carry the burden, Christ will carry you. For underneath us are the everlasting arms of an all sufficient grace which never fails. (a)

(b) THE WHAT OF THIS SUFFICIENCY:

Do you see the Lord’s **PLENTIFUL SUPPLY ?** “ *My grace is sufficient for thee.*” The word “ *sufficient,*” speaks of that which is enough. God’s grace is always enough for whatever your problem or whatever you are going through. Charles Spurgeon was riding home one evening after a heavy day’s work, feeling weary and depressed. This verse came to his mind, “ ***my grace is sufficient for thee.***” In his mind he immediately compared himself to a little fish in the Thames River, afraid lest drinking so many pints of water in the river each day he might drink the Thames dry. Then the Thames said to him, “ *Drink away little fish, my stream is sufficient for thee.*” Next he thought about a little mouse in the granaries of Egypt, afraid lest its daily nibbles exhaust the supplies and cause it to starve to death. Then Joseph comes along and says, “ *Cheer up, little mouse. My granaries are sufficient for you.*” Then

he thought of a man climbing some high mountain to reach its lofty summit and dreading lest his breathing might exhaust all the oxygen in the atmosphere. The Creator booms his voice out from heaven saying, “ *Breathe away, oh man, and fill your lungs. My atmosphere is sufficient for you.*” Have no fear, burdened believer. His grace is sufficient for you. His supply will match your need. Never too much, never too little, never too soon, never too late. Perfectly timed and perfectly adequate. Our God is the “ *God of all grace.*” (1 Pet 5:10) and His throne is “ *a throne of grace.*” (Heb 4:16) The Word of God is “ *The Word of His grace,*” (Acts 20:32) and the promise is that “ *He giveth more grace.*” (James 4:6) No matter how you look at it, God is adequate for every need you have. Divine grace in all its freshness, fullness and freeness is yours. (a) (b)

(c) ***THE WHEN OF THIS SUFFICIENCY:***

Do you see the Lord’s **PRESENT RESOURCES** ? He says “ *My grace is sufficient,*” right now for its present tense. God’s grace not only adequate but available for every time of need. When Webb Peplow one of the greatest Bible teachers of the early Keswick Convention was a young man one of his dear children died while the family was at the seaside. Returning from the funeral the stricken father knelt in his study and asked God to make his grace sufficient. But no comfort came to his heart as the tears continued to flow. Even the Bible seemed to have no message for him. But after some time he read again the text that hung over the mantelpiece and for the first time he noticed one word

in capitals. “ *My grace is,*” He cried, “ *Lord forgive me I’ve been asking thee to make your grace sufficient and all the time you have been saying ‘ Webb my grace is sufficient.’ I thank you for sufficient grace and I appropriate it now.*” Are your circumstances such, that you need His grace ? Have you been praying that God would take something out of your life ? That He would change your circumstances ? And the Lord is now telling you that this thing is going to remain, it is not going to be taken away, the pressure is going to stay. Are you ready to believe that God has made adequate provision for your need ? My you may **face situations beyond your reserves but never beyond God’s resources.** For God’s grace is sufficient for your need now. (1) (2)

(3) **THE PERSPECTIVE THAT CHANGED PAUL**

For in response to the Lord’s instruction Paul replied, “ *Most gladly therefore,*” (12:9-10) Paul has now a different perspective because of what the Lord said to him. For Paul now there is,

(a) ***THE ACCEPTANCE OF GOD’S PURPOSE***

He says, “ *Most gladly therefore will I rather glory,*” Or as A.T. puts it “ *I shall therefore prefer.*” What would Paul prefer ? What would he rather have ? We’ll surely he’s saying that he’d rather that this pressure and pain stayed. Why ? Because these things provided opportunities for Paul to prove afresh the sufficiency of God’s grace. Can you see the Gift to Paul ? For this thorn was a gift from the Lord’s hand ultimately. (12:7)

Can you see the Grace for Paul ? Now can you see the Glory of Paul ? Paul is giving a shout of victory even in the midst of his distresses ? I don't what the " **thorn,**" is in your life this ? That thorn that seems so desperate that you want to get rid of it, but could you, dare you, could I, dare I, look at the thing and say to the Lord, knowing that through it we would prove the sufficiency of His grace, " *Lord I'd rather that it stayed.*" (a)

*Accept it. From Thy hand, dear Lord I take
This hurting thing, and bear it for Thy sake.
Not bear it only, but in Thy dear name,
Thy strength, Thy power, to love it Lord, I claim:
To love it till from struggles, toil and tears,
The likeness of Thy life in me appears.
Accept it. From Thy hand this thing I take,
Lord, make it glorious for Thine own name's sake*

(b) THE ASSURANCE OF GOD'S POWER:

For he says, " *Most gladly therefore will I rather glory that the power of Christ may rest upon me.*" (12:9)
The word " *rest,*" means a tent spread over us. It's the only time it's found in the New Testament. Paul says Every moment of my life I am sheltered by the power of Christ, and the power of the Risen Lord abides on me. It is made available to me. Now did you notice that the power of Christ abides on Paul only when he glories in his distresses ? It's a chain reaction. Some of you say, " *Preacher, I've had troubles, problems, pressures, infirmities, but I haven't seen the power of Christ in my life.*" No, because you have not gloried in those things.

You've complained, griped and grown bitter. My do you know what will turn the trick ? When you get God's viewpoint and agree with God and say,

Lord, I know you have sent this as your gift, and I praise you for it. I glory in it because I know it means you are working in my life." Have you grasp that ? Do you hear the Lord saying to you this " *Christian I allow these difficulties to come into your life because your weakness is the stage on which I display my power and strength.*" Helen Keller once said about her blindness and deafness, " *I thank God for my handicaps, for through them I have found myself, my work, and my God.*

Some years ago on arrival from China a missionary was asked to go and see an invalid. He was blind, lying upon a bed unable to turn in any direction but his heart was full of the grace of service. For 29 years he had lay like that fed only on liquid foods. For 22 years he was blind. Is it possible that such a one could do anything to help others ? Seventeen children are supported by his efforts in India, ten in China, a blind Bible woman in Korea, a blind boy in the Sudan, a blind boy in Fiji and one in Jaffa. Three hundred pounds a year is received in answer to prayer by that faithful, silent sightless, paralysed disciple in that little shut in room in Melbourne, Australia and you say " *what's the secret of it all ?*" " *My grace*" Here is the **Source**: " *MY grace.*" Here is the **Supply**: " *Sufficient.*" Here is the **Sustenance** it brings: " *Sufficient for Thee.*" **The Source is Infinite: The Supply is Proportionate and the Sustenance is Personally Adequate.**

*So He giveth more grace as the burdens grow greater,
He sendeth more strength as the labours increase
To addeth affliction He addeth His mercy,
To multiplied trials, His multiplied peace
When we have exhausted our strength of endurance
When our strength has failed ere the day is half done
When we reach the end of our hoarded resources
Our Fathers full giving is only begun,
His love has no limit
His grace has no measure
His power no boundary know unto men,
And out of His infinite riches in Jesus,
He giveth and giveth and giveth again*