**November 21, 2021 2 Corinthians 12:6-10**

***Clay and Thorns***

**Scripture:** *2 Corinthians 12:6-10 NRSV*

*(6)But if I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me, (7)even considering the exceptional character of the revelations. Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. (8)Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, (9)but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. (10)Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.*

**Notes:**

1. What happens when our ***prayers*** don’t work?
   1. Life leaves scars that are a constant ***reminder*** of struggles.
   2. Life is ***fragile*** and sometimes we end up with a thorn that can’t be prayed away
   3. Paul was a strong man, and not a ***spiritual*** ***weakling***.
2. What happens when the thorn doesn’t ***go*** ***away***?
   1. ***Grace*** emerges, discovered amid the fragile, cracked jars and thorns of our life.
   2. ***Sufficient*** ***grace*** of God, is there when things are more than you can handle.
3. In our suffering that we learn to lean on the Lord and trust in His ***sufficient*** ***grace***.
   1. His ***sufficient*** ***grace*** develops endurance.
   2. Endurance produces ***character***.
   3. character produces ***hope***.
4. What does grace do for us and what does it not do?
   1. Grace *doesn’t* ***remove*** the memories.
   2. Grace *doesn’t* ***exempt*** us from the damage.
   3. Grace *doesn’t* ***extract*** the sorrow.
   4. Grace *doesn’t* ***resolve*** our fragility.
   5. Grace *does* ***reframe*** our stories.
   6. Grace *does* ***work*** in the cracks.
   7. Grace *does* ***deepen*** intimacy.
   8. Grace *does* ***reveal*** its source.
5. The Lord’s ***sufficient*** ***grace*** lifts, strengthens, and encourages.

**Script:**

Throughout our lives we have seen others traveling this Journey of Grace that we have been looking at these past few weeks. I have known faithful followers who have seemed to have lived a blessed life. Everything seemed to work out in their favor. They had nice cars, they were able to meet their financial obligations without much struggle. They seemed to be very happy and content in where they have found their selves.

And then there were those who seemed to be just the opposite. It seemed as if every endeavor they pursued ended up in turmoil. They invested their retirement in a retirement account that went belly up. They worked at a job that required them to work long hours with very little relief. And their pay was barely able to take them above the poverty level. Life for them was a struggle. They had physical ailments High Blood pressure, Diabetes, Arthritus, and the list goes on and on. Yet their faith in Jesus was just as strong as any.

How can that be, when everything in their life seems to lead to difficulty, how can they continue to give glory to our Lord, Jesus Christ? First let me say that every person who seems to have the perfect life, have problems as well. Let me say that a lot of what we see on the outside is based on the attitude of the person we are looking to. And finally let me say, that even though it seems as though some people have been dealt a difficult hand, they still trust in Jesus because it is in him that they find hope for what lies ahead. It is in our jars of clay, our cracked pots; and our thorns in our side that are left in place to display the strength of God in our weakness. They are persistent reminders that the Lord is in control and He will supply our very need. We look today at 2 Corinthians 12:6-10 where Paul reminds us of his infirmities, and where his hope comes from. Stand with me as we share on the reading of our passage today. Paul writes:

*(6)But if I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me, (7)even considering the exceptional character of the revelations. Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. (8)Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, (9)but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. (10)Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong. 2 Corinthians 12:6-10 NRSV .*

Overthe past few weeks, we have been on a journey exploring this journey of grace that all, who follow Jesus, travel. We recognize it as a journey, because it begins when we first experience the prevenient grace of God. Many of us do not realize this until much later when we recognize that the Lord is inviting us in. Eventually we have to decide whether we will accept his saving grace. It’s an invitation to get close to Jesus, to walk with him, grow, be transformed, and be commissioned to serve him in this world. We’ve talked about the grace that goes before us, making a way for us. We’ve talked about the saving grace of God that holistically changes us. We’ve talked about the sanctifying grace of God that empowers us to live faithfully, even when our best efforts and good intentions seemingly fail us.We’ve talked about sustaining grace, the grace that keeps us moving forward on the path we’ve been called to so that our life of faith isn’t a sprint but a marathon.

And we’ve celebrated, a lot during the past few weeks! And we should! Grace gives us much to celebrate. Grace is the gift of God’s favor toward us. It’s the gift that changes everything. Paul suggests in Philippians that we shine like stars and in Romans that we are more than conquerors. Paul has a lot to say about how grace enables us to overcome, to rise above sin, to transform us into the new creation.

Grace makes all things new; except when it doesn’t. Hold up—I know what you’re thinking: *I thought we were celebrating?* Yes. Scriptures are heavy in that they provide resolutions to excess. If we aren’t careful, we can misconstrue grace into a form of spiritual force field providing us with some idea that we are invincible. But it can also leave us thinking that the suffering in this world is a result of our poor choices and something trivial. But even worse than this we start to assume that if we’re living in God’s grace then whatever suffering we encounter, can be prayed away with a few nicely choreographed words.

But what happens when our suffering does not go away after a prayer? What happens when the worst of our fears is realized and our desires are nothing more than wishful thinking? What happens when our prayers don’t work? What happens when our prayers are not answered as we would like work? Life is rough and often we find ourselves tumbling out if control. When things occur out of nowhere with no warning and now preparation. Rarely is life as simple as black and white. We often find ourselves dealing with many different shades of gray. Sometimes life leaves an enduring mark, a scar that is a constant reminder of the struggles we may have had. Sometimes that jar of clay that Paul suggests holds glory, gets cracked; sometimes it may even be broken and all that we hoped it held for us, runs out onto the ground. Life, is fragile and sometimes we end up like Paul, with a thorn that can’t be prayed away

Paul had such a thorn that he speaks of in our passage today. But Paul does not give us any specific details regarding what this thorn in the flesh is. Obviously a thorn in the flesh is figurative, meaning that he didn’t have a real thorn, but some ailment, condition, or situation that caused him constant distress and discomfort. Some have suggested that he had some sort of medical issue. Others suggest it was a condition or situation that he was attached to from before his walk with Christ, that he was not able to excuse or separate from.

Let’s also understand that Paul was a strong man, and he was not a spiritual weakling. In the previous chapter of 2 Corinthians Paul explains that he has worked hard, been jailed more often than he cares to remember, been beaten up more often than he can remember, including floggings, stoned, and beaten with rods. He has survived being shipwrecked not just once but three times and once left to float in the sea all night and all day. In his travels, year in and year out, he has had to ford rivers, fend off robbers, and struggle with friends and foes. He has been in danger constantly in his travels and ministry; facing the desert sun, the storms at sea, and betrayal by those whom he trusted. SO there is nobody who could call Paul a coward or a weakling. Paul faced the elements, and opponents as well as the pressures and anxiety of ministry wherever he went. And yet, he talks about this thorn in his flesh, and that is what Paul begs God to remove.

Paul seemed to beg God for the removal of the thorn. But what happens when the thorn doesn’t go away? What happens when the mental health crisis persists? What happens when the loved one we are praying for dies? What happens when we still lose our job? What happens then?

What happens then is grace; grace emerges that isn’t merely a fix-it for every issue. Instead, grace is found; discovered amid the fragile, cracked jars and persistent thorns of our lives. Paul tells us about the strength of God made perfect in our weakness. Paul talks about a God who picks us up in His arms and carries us through the difficult times. Grace that is sufficient for what we are going through. Sufficient grace is God’s way of saying, “*When you come to the end of your human strength, I will give you my supernatural strength. When your energy runs out, my energy will be made alive in you. When you cannot go any farther, I will pick you up and carry you. Rest in my arms for a while.”*

Many of us have heard the poem *Footprints in the Sand,* the story of a man who had a dream that he was walking along the beach and in the sky flashed events of his life. For each scene he saw two sets of footprints in the sand, one belonging to him and one belonging to the Lord. When the last scene of his life flashed in the sky he looked back and noticed that in the most difficult events of his life there were only one set of footprints in the sand. This bothered him so he asked the Lord, “Lord, you said that once I decided to follow you, you’d walk with me all the way. But I have noticed that during some of the most troublesome times f my life there is only one set of footprints. I don’t understand why, when I needed you the most, you would leave?” And to this the Lord replied, “*My precious, precious child, I love you and I would never leave you. During your times of trial and suffering, when you see only one set of footprints , it was then that I carried you.”*

The sufficient grace of God, is there when things are more than you can handle on your own. It is the grace of God that carries you when you cannot seem to find the strength to get up and keep moving. Sufficient grace is the grace you need today and it is just enough to see you through each day. Sufficient grace is the grace that holds on. .

Sufficient grace is there with you when things are easy, and pleasant. But we rarely recognize t because we aren’t looking for it. However, when things get difficult, we turn to the Lord and it is then that we look for God’s sufficient grace. It is in our suffering that we learn to lean on the Lord and trust in His sufficient grace. As we trust in and rely on His sufficient grace we develop endurance.

Endurance produces character. Problems and trials produce endurance and endurance produces strength of character; something that is so badly needed in every level of our society today. One does not just wake up one day and has character. Character is developed through hard work and endurance.

Endurance produces character, and character produces hope. Hope is the calm, certain belief that God is with us. Hope is the confident expectation that no matter what the future holds, our journey of grace Companion, the Lord Jesus Christ, holds the future in the palm of His hand.

So we often ask, what does grace do for us and what does it not do? Grace *doesn’t* remove the memories. All of the things that we have done and remember, no matter if they were good or bad, they still remain. Grace is not some magic eraser that eliminates the memory of the things we have done that are wrong, and only keep the good ones. When you think about it, I would tend to think that it is better to remember the guilt and conviction we experienced when we did something wrong, so we may strive to never do it again.

Grace *doesn’t* exempt us from the damage. We live our lives in an attempt to find satisfaction. When we live in sin we live this life seeking worldly pleasures, doing things that can sometimes be harmful and even fatal to our bodies. God’s grace does not exempt us from the damage that this lifestyle results in. Even though we may have been saved from our sins, we are left to live with the consequences of those sins. For those who committed crimes, for those who use illegal substances, you are still held accountable for those crimes. For those who abused substances whether it be drugs, tobacco products, or even alcohol; you may suffer from the long term effects of using these substances. God doesn’t exempt you from the damage.

Grace *doesn’t* extract the sorrow. We all have regrets and sorrow that are a result of our formal sinful life. God will not remove these sorrows from our life. Just like living with the damage caused by our sinful past, our sinful past also exposes us to the sorrows of living with the things we have done. We have the hurt feelings of relationships that have been broken because of our sinful past. We have the sorrows of those we have hurt, and those who have hurt us. And, we continue to have these sorrows to deal with as we continue down this journey of grace.

Grace *doesn’t* resolve our fragility. Grace does not change us physically; nor will it change our inner dialog. We will continue to live with the same physical constraints we had before we come to surrender to the Lord. We will also continue to think with the same inner dialog, telling us what to say, what to think, and what to do. It is only through the process of maturing as a Christian that these ideas and ways of thinking will be able to grow and change.

[Deep breath!] That is what grace does not do. So to balance things out, here is what grace can do. Grace *does* reframe our stories. Paul writes, “(11)When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. 1 Corinthians 13:11 NRSV” In much of the same way we all mature in our journey of grace and as we do, God reframes our stories, demonstrating His love for us and helping us. We change as God works with us and we begin to transform into somebody who is more like Jesus.

Grace *does* work in the cracks. Likewise as God works with us, transforming our lives he works in the cracks of our lives. When we find ourself in a difficult place when the vessel that we are is cracked because of something that has happened, God is working in those cracks for the good of those who believe in Him. But as He works in the cracks, he also works to fill in the cracks and make you whole again. Grace works in the cracks.

Grace *does* deepen intimacy. As we allow the sufficient grace of God to work in our lives, the intimacy in our lives also deepens. First the intimacy between God and ourself grows, and we find it much easier to talk with God, to understand how he would do things, and we begin to act more like Jesus. But grace also deepens the intimacy in our human relationships as well. As we become more comfortable in who God is making us to be, we begin to draw closer to those who are a part of our life. Grace does deepen intimacy.

Grace *does* reveal its source. I have alluded to this throughout the past few statements. But as grace works in our lives, we begin to act and think more like Christ. This transformation reveals the source of this transformation as God himself. God is revealed in the transformation that takes place in your life. Grace does reveal its source.

The Lords Prevenient grace comes before and woos us until we begin to look at him. And when we make a decision to make him lord and savior of our life, His saving grace redeems us and we begin this transformation. Soon his sanctifying grace begins to transform us as we learn and grow, and his sustaining grace keeps us moving in the right direction. But it the Lord’s sufficient grace that lifts us when we fall, gives us strength when it seems to tough to keep moving, and gives us the encouragement to continue on even when things seem too difficult.

Most of you have all been through the struggles of this world. You have had trials, you have had persistent difficulties, and you have faced disappointments in your life. But along with these struggles you have had God’s sufficient grace to see you through. You may not have noticed but it is true. You have had the love of God carrying you through these difficult times. You have had the Lord holding on to you with tenacity. And even when you are faced with end of life situations, the Lord has been there with you supplying just enough grace to see you through.

Today I would like us to end with just a quiet time of reflection and prayer. You may come to the altar or you may remain in your seats.