



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

2 Corinthians 12:7-10

“The Thorn, the Torment, and the Grace”

TRANSCRIPT

[Message] The Scripture reading for today is 2 Corinthians chapter 12, verse 7 through verse 10. Two weeks ago when we were expounding the earlier part of this chapter and talking about Paul’s rapture to paradise, the third heaven, the apostle had gone on to speak about the fact that he knew a man in Christ who had had this experience and that on behalf of such a man he would boast but not on his own behalf. In his own behalf, he would only boast on account of his weaknesses, for he did not wish to be regarded as foolish boasting about himself.

Well, now, the apostle goes on to speak about one of the consequences of that amazing experience that he had of being caught up to the third heaven, to paradise. And in the 7th verse he writes in 2 Corinthians 12,

“And because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me—to keep me from exalting myself! Concerning this I entreated the Lord three times that it might depart from me. (That incidentally could be rendered that he might depart from me in which case we should understand the messenger of Satan to be Satan himself whatever he may have used with reference to the apostle’s ministry.

Concerning this, he entreated the Lord three times that it might depart from me.) And He has said to me, My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness. Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may dwell in me.”

The expression translated “dwell” is an expression that in the eyes of many students of 2 Corinthians suggests the tabernacle of the Old Testament in which the Lord symbolically maintained his presence. And, therefore, we might render this that Christ made tabernacle in me. The point is that the apostle feels that through the experiences of life in his weaknesses as he trusts in the Lord, the power of Christ will tabernacle over him.

“Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; (and by the way this expression for Christ's sake applies to all of the five nouns that precedes, insults for Christ's sake, distresses for Christ's sake, and so on. For he concludes,) “For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

It's a remarkable experience, we will talk about it in a few moments after we look to the Lord in prayer and sing another hymn. Let's bow together at the moment.

[Prayer] Father, we thank Thee, and we praise Thy name for the privilege of the reading of the word of God and for the enlightenment and the blessing that comes to us as we reflect upon the things that Thou hast preserved for us that through the Scriptures we might come to know Thee better and that the experience of progressive sanctification may be our experience. We thank Thee for this beautiful day and for all of the blessings of life as we have just been singing.

Thou hast truly been good to us Lord, and we are so often unthankful and rebel against Thee. Deliver us from our sins, from our rebellion, from our weaknesses and failures, to acknowledge Thee as Lord of Lords and King of Kings. We thank Thee and praise Thee for the privilege of proclaiming the word of God in our day and generation and may, as it is proclaimed the Holy Spirit, make the word fruitful.

We pray for our meeting and for other meetings as well and for the whole body of Christ today. May the blessing of the triune God rest upon us. We thank Thee for the privilege of the ministry of the word, and we pray Thy blessing upon Believer’s Chapel and its outreach, for its radio ministry and for the publications, for the Bible classes that are taught, and for other forms of outreach, especially the tapes. Lord, may Thy blessing be upon it that Christ may be exalted.

We pray for our country. We ask Thy blessing upon the United States in the difficult world in which we find ourselves. And, Lord, for each of our leaders in Believers Chapel, the elders and the deacons, we pray. And for the members and the friends, and the visitors today, may Lord our experience with the word of God and in this meeting be an experience that will have lasting benefits for us. Lord, give us more dedication and devotion to the Lord Jesus Christ who gave himself that we might have the forgiveness of sins. We commit this meeting to Thee and the meetings of this day.

In Jesus’ name. Amen.

[Message] We all know that when we sing hymns, we often follow the hymn writer in the expression of great aspirations. In one sense, it’s a good thing that we are not held liable for all of the things that we sing. That is, as if they were confessions of what is true in our life. To him, I’ve given all my heart, you have just sung and I with you. The world shall never share a part, what a wonderful savior. How nice it would be if that were true. To him, I’ve given all my heart. The world will never share a part.

If there is anything that is characteristic of the Christian church it is today, besides the principle of accommodation, accommodation to the kind of life that is being lived about us, it is the worldliness of the church of Christ. We sing that, and we sing it as an aspiration. It certainly is not true of the evangelical church, but it’s a worthy aspiration that we should give everything to him and that the world should not share a part. Because if there is anything that the Apostle John makes plain and others the friendship of the world is enmity against God. So as evangelical Christians in nineteen eighty-seven, as we approach the Christmas season, it’s particularly, I think, relative to us that we remember that our devotion and dedication is to be to the Lord and that the world about us is really a world that lies in the wicked one, as the Scriptures say, and is at enmity with God.

Now, we are looking at 2 Corinthians. We are drawing near the end of the exposition, I think there will be about thirty-five messages on the epistle. We have about two more. And the subject for today is, “The Thorn, the Torment, and the Grace.”

Life-changing experiences mark the lives of many saints. When we look in the Scriptures, for example, we remember the life-changing experience that Abraham had when he lived in Ur of the Chaldees and God spoke to him and called him out to go to a land which he did not have any understanding of. He went out to a land he knew not with her. And then, of course, that reached its climax when Abraham offers up Isaac, and there was a man touched by God who was never the same thereafter.

Jacob, when he wrestled with the Lord, became a different person. Before, he walked without a limp, afterwards he walked with a limp, which was just a reminder of the fact that he had wrestled with the Lord, and he had lost.

And others of the saints of the Old Testament, men like Moses at the burning bush, David and his experiences, even his bad experiences, his great sin of adultery, Hosea called upon by the Lord as a prophet to marry a prostitute, Augustine, Luther, Toplady to come down near our time, Jonathan Edwards of whom we’ve been hearing

recently from Dr. Gerstner, a man who was forced out of his church, one of the greatest minds ever produced by America, and one of the real truly spiritual geniuses of the United States. And the people in North Hampton couldn’t stand his ministry, and so he went out to preach to the Indians who, when Edwards was called to be president of what has become Princeton University, exhorted him to stay with them and minister to them. If wise men in North Hampton could not understand Edwards, Indians could. It’s characteristic of the word of God that many wise men cannot understand Paul but sinners despairing, who need redemption and know it, they understand Paul, and they find him imminently useful and a blessing to them in their deepest experiences of life.

We have even seen men in our day who have had unusual experiences. When Charles Colson affirmed that he had been born again, I confess I was one of the doubters. I had the privilege of talking with Mr. Colson for about two hours in Dallas not very long after he got out of prison. And that disturbed me a little bit because our conversation was indicative, it seemed to me, of a genuine new birth. I say disturbed me because I really had great questions about the reality of a conversion in which an individual who has been in the penitentiary informs us that he’s had a spiritual experience such as a new birth.

And I must say one of the privileges that I had, which was unknown to me, was that I exhorted him as a Christian to engage himself with systematic theology and recommended some books to him, wrote him, he wrote me back and thanked me for it. And a year and a half or so ago, I read Mr. Colson’s book in which he speaks about the feelings that he had when he was in the penitentiary and the deep remorse and shame that he felt for himself, for his family, and anyone reading that could not help, it seems to me, to fail to realize that here is a man who has had a deep experience. And undoubtedly a very wise and intelligent man, and his life since as the months and years have gone by have testified to the fact that God has indeed done an unusual work in this man who now is widely respected among evangelicals of the highest caliber and still

carries on a ministry, and a big ministry, to men who are in the prison such as he was at one time.

We are grateful for the knowledge of the experiences of these men, some of them in Scripture, some who are not Scriptural figures. Deep souls do not lightly reveal their secrets.

And the apostle, in his case, would never have revealed this stunning secret about his rapture to paradise, and the consequent thorn in the flesh, had he not been forced to do it by the super-spiritual triumphalists who had come to Corinth, had praised themselves, had also extolled their so-called experiences so that even the Corinthians were carried away by them. And so these visionary opponents that the apostle had in Corinth, the apostle finally felt must be answered from his own experiences. He didn’t like to boast. He hated boasting, but he felt it necessary to boast.

In fact, after he finishes the unfolding of the revelation of the rapture to paradise and the thorn in the flesh as Satan’s messenger, he states in the 11th verse, the very verse that ends this passage, “I have become foolish, you yourselves compel me. Actually, I should have been commended by you for in no respect was I inferior to most eminent apostles even though I am a nobody.”

The painful affliction of the thorn in the flesh is obviously one of the consequences of being caught up to the third heaven. And the apostle’s words here convey many, many lessons, many of them important lessons. We could never, in one message, exhaust all of the lessons that flow from it, but among them are these.

First of all, the causes of suffering are many and mysterious. Suffering is often our experience because we are foolish, and we are disobedient to the Lord. We should remember that. Our own rebellion afflicts us. But also suffering is due to the fact that our Lord desires at times to chasten us. If sin is sometimes cause for our suffering, it’s also true that sometimes our suffering is brought about by the Lord to keep us from sinning. That’s evident in Paul’s case here. In fact, suffering is caused by so many things

we don’t have time to talk about all of the things. It’s caused by simple aging. And all of us age. And the very fact that we age means that we shall in measure suffer.

So the causes of suffering are many, and they are mysterious. Sometimes our suffering is for education. God desires, as he desired in the case of Job, to educate Satan with regard to Job and to educate Job with regard to himself. This is a rather important thing, you see, because today many people have the common misunderstanding that if we are suffering, we are surely sinning. And, therefore, all suffering is traced to the fact that we are sinning. If we weren’t sinning then everything would be marvelous.

The health-and-wealth gospel that has become so popular because so many people keep their eyes glued to the television screen is an instance of it. If we simply will follow the directions of the super-spirituals, then we will not only be healthy, but we will be wealthy as well. If there is anything that is a shallow view of the word of God it is that. The astonishing thing is that so many people evidently believe it. God causes us to suffer for different reasons. Some of them are because we have been foolish and disobedient. But many are for other reasons belonging to the discipline and chastening of the Lord God. In his grace, God forgives us our sins. It’s true. But in his government, he must permit us to reap what we sew.

And so, consequently, the experiences of life must take into account these things. If there is anything that illustrates the falsity of the idea that all suffering is caused simply by sin, if we weren’t sinning then everything would be marvelous to us, is taught by the Pentecostals themselves. As is evident by what happened in Zimbabwe this past week in which, I am assuming, sixteen simple-minded missionaries to the land of Zimbabwe were hacked to death by revolutionaries. Now, I don’t think anyone would say they were hacked to death because they were sinning. Suffering is not always related to our sinning.

Now, there is another lesson that the apostle unfolds for us here, and that is that God *and* Satan may be responsible for suffering. In Paul’s case he traces his suffering to

the Lord God. He traces his suffering to Satan himself as well. We’ll have more to say about that in a moment.

We also learn another thing, a very positive thing that physical affliction such as the apostle had is not preventative of Christian service. It’s true that the apostle was afflicted with a thorn for his flesh, a messenger of Satan, but his ministry did not deteriorate because of that. It actually was enhanced by the experiences that the apostle must go through. So whatever our afflictions may be, you can be sure of this, that God is well able to use even those in affliction to forward the work that he is doing in the testimony to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Well, now, let’s turn to our passage. And in verse 7 the apostle writes of God and Satan, partners in humbling Paul. Listen again to what he says, “And because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me--to keep me from exalting myself!” You noticed in the preceding verses the apostle spoke of his experience of being caught up to the third heaven in the third person. A man in Christ, Paul says I knew him, I knew him caught up. He doesn’t want any of his readers to think that he had anything to do with that in any way or that he was to be commended in any way for that. So he puts it in the third person. But now when he comes to the thorn in the flesh, he talks in the first person. And the very fact that he does suggests that he realizes that he is responsible for the experiences that he has ultimately. So he addresses the Corinthians in verse 7 as a responsible, humbled man.

Now, the rapture, he said, necessitated, on my part, pain and torment. One might ask why. Well, he says twice over so he’d have no question about it because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations for this reason to keep me from exalting myself. There was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, to keep me from exalting myself. In other words, if a man had had an experience such as Paul had a temptation that would be to become an insufferably arrogant man, such as we so often

see in human beings today who claim certain remarkable experiences as having happen to them.

They become insufferably arrogant, super-spiritual visionaries claiming that God has specially ministered to them and upon no provable and credible grounds whatsoever. If I were to say to you, I had a vision last night of the Lord Jesus Christ and he told me such and such, there is no way in the world in which I could prove that to you. A man who if he should have such an experience as that should go around bragging about it, arrogantly speaking of it, is obviously a man who doesn’t have any perception at all of true spirituality.

Now, if there is any man who could have done that, and Paul does refer at times to certain of the times in which the Lord appears to him, but not like being caught up to the third heaven to paradise -- if there is any man who could stand something like that and not let it go to his head, it would be the Apostle Paul. But God said, with reference to Paul, that even though he’s an apostle it must not be allowed to go to his head. What that experience was intended to do was to enhance the glory and grace and power of the Lord God. How dangerous must self-exaltation be when even an apostle required so much restraint by the Lord God in heaven?

Now, Paul says there was given me. Now, anyone reflecting upon that will recognize immediately that this is the work of the Lord God. In fact, some fine commentators have suggested that it’s so obvious that it’s the work of God there was given to me a thorn for the flesh that we should understand this as a divine passive, that is a divine passive voice, a new grammatical category. I would not follow that, it’s the context that makes this a divinely passive activity. There was given to me. In other words, the ultimate cause of the Pauline experience is the sovereign God. Let us not forget that. In fact, that’s the ultimate cause of everything in this universe our sovereign God who is one.

Now, when you think of the experiences that are set forth in the word of God, you can find many illustrations of events that occur that are to be related first and foremost to the Lord God, but also related to other agencies as well. Let’s take a simple one, the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus Christ. The crucifixion of the Lord Jesus Christ, if we are not careful students of the word of God, we might think was caused by men. Well, of course, the Bible does say that men are responsible for the death of Christ, but the Bible also says others are responsible as well. In fact, even in the Old Testament we have anticipations of this. In the psalm of our Lord’s crucifixion, Psalm 22, the one that he quoted from when he was on the cross, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me.” In the 15th verse as the psalmist speaks either typically or in a directly predictive way of the cross of our Lord he says, “My strength is dried up like a potsherd and my tongue cleaves to my jaws and thou doest lay me in the dust of death.” In other words, the death is traced to the Lord God himself ultimately.

Now, if we have any question about that the Old Testament in Isaiah chapter 53 in verse 10, in a clearly Messianic passage, we read, but the Lord was pleased to crush him putting him to grief. God was pleased in the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus Christ. It was the carrying out of his will by his obedient son. In the Book of Acts, the Apostle Peter clearly understands this, for in his great sermon on the day of Pentecost he states, “Men of Israel, listen to these words, Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and signs and wonders which God performed through him in your midst just as you yourselves know this man delivered up by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God. You nailed to a cross by the hands of Godless men and put him to death. So determine it counsel and foreknowledge of God but you with wicked hands have nailed him to the tree.”

Later on, speaking again in the meeting in Acts chapter 4, we read, “When they heard this they lifted their voices to God with one accord and said, O Lord, it is thou who didst make the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them, who by the Holy

Spirit through the mouth of our father, David thy servant, didst say why did the Gentiles rage and the peoples devise futile things. The kings of the earth took their stand and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord and against his Christ. (Now, listen) for truly in this city there were gathered together against thy holy servant Jesus whom thou didst anoint both Herod and Pontius Pilate with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel.” That’s very inclusive. Everybody there responsible to do whatever thy hand and thy purpose predestined to occur. So the death of our Lord is by the divine determination of the Lord God in heaven. The ultimate cause but it is through men who are to be responsible for their deeds.

But not only that, we read in the New Testament the Lord Jesus voluntarily gave himself to death. We read in Galatians chapter 2 in verse 20, “I have been crucified with Christ and I know longer live.” And then he says, I better go back and do that again, “I have been crucified with Christ” and aging I said [laughter] was cause of suffering. It’s cause for other things as well besides suffering. Memory, now you know that’s the first thing I have forgotten since this morning [laughter]. “I have been crucified with Christ, and it’s no longer I who live but Christ lives in me, and the life which I now live in the flesh, I live by faith and the Son of God, now notice what follows, who loved me and delivered himself over for me.” So our Lord is responsible, the wicked men are responsible, the Lord God in heaven is responsible. So you can see that when we talk about events occurring, there are different agencies, one ultimate, others intermediate. God is the ultimate agent. There was given to me. That’s something that God did.

Now, he says it’s a thorn in the flesh. It could be rendered thorn for the flesh. What this is, no one knows certainly. We know this, the apostle had the experience of being in paradise and then soon after he was in pain. He had the experience of ecstasy and shortly afterwards agony. There are explanations galore of Paul’s thorn in the flesh. If we were to just simply innumerate them it would take us literally minutes and minutes and minutes just to speak them.

For example, some have called it a pain in the ear or in the head. That was what I was feeling a minute ago. [Laughter] Such troublesome characters as Hymenaeus and Alexander were the thorn in the flesh. Chrysostom thought incidentally, Chrysostom also thought it was men like Hymenaeus and Philetus who didn’t pay any attention to the apostle’s message, and so therefore the apostle’s thorn in the flesh was that when he preached individuals didn’t pay a whole lot of attention to what he was saying. If that’s Paul’s thorn for the flesh, then I have a lot of sympathy with him because I’ve had a lot of the same experience. Mind you, not in Believers Chapel cause you believe everything that I say. [Laughter] But that is Chrysostom’s view.

Others have felt it was a ophthalmia, epilepsy, convulsive attacks of different kinds, ophthalmia, Malaria, Malta fever particularly, some even have gone as far as not only to identify the fever, but actually where it may be found in the apostle’s ministry, sufferings caused by constant persecutions, attacks of depression after periods of exaltation, the agony caused by the unbelief of his Jewish brethren, the memory of his persecution of the church, and so on, and so on, and so on. One Frenchman has said that when you read down the list of the interpretations that have been put upon it and just list the terms, it’s like reading a medical dictionary. There have been that many attempts to identify Paul’s thorn in the flesh.

Now, we won’t identify it. I do know this, he describes it as a messenger of Satan. The term “messenger” is a term, so far as I can tell, means angel in most of its occurrences in the New Testament messenger, the word is *angelos* from which we get angel. The angel of Satan may well be a reference to a personal being, because the word almost always, I think always, refers to a personal being. And if it refers to a personal being, the thorn for the flesh, the messenger of Satan, it refers to the kind of thing that Job experienced when Satan, through his own agencies, persecuted that great patient man of the Old Testament. At any rate, all we can say is there are lots of explanations, some of

them are more understandable, have more credibility than others, but none of them are really capable of proof.

A thorn for the flesh, now, when he says it is a messenger of Satan, he’s talking about the instrumental permissive cause. God’s the one who gave the thorn in the flesh, but it’s called a messenger of Satan. Since the apostle speaks of Satan hindering his work and his plans from time to time, there is no question but that Satan was involved in this thorn for the flesh. But what it was, we don’t know. As we think of Job, how in that interesting account in that first chapter of the Book of Job -- and the 2nd chapter, too, for that matter -- how God came into the presence of the Lord and the Lord asked him where have you been Satan, and he said well I’ve been throughout the earth and the Lord said have you noticed my servant Job that there isn’t anybody like him? And Job says as well, to use a term that will become very popular in 1987, Job has special interests. His special interests are that you’ve been protecting him. You’ve been blessing him. He’s been prosperous. Everything that he does is blessed by you. Take away all of that, then we’ll see what happens to Job.

And you know it’s a very dramatic thing -- it’s been put to drama. Someone, the Lord says all right Satan you can have Job except you cannot take his life. And so then the calamities begin. And the sheep go and the oxen go and through the thunder and the lightning and the earthquakes, everything goes, even his whole family. And Job never once cursed the Lord. He bowed his head and worshipped as the Scripture says, “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, naked I shall return there. The Lord gave, the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.” Through all this Job did not sin nor did he blame God.

Now, how do you think an apostle would respond to this? I can just imagine, Lord, I’m an apostle. You’ve appointed me to go to the Gentiles. You’ve appointed me to preach the gospel to them and also to be a witness to the Nation Israel. And now I have this vile thorn for my flesh whatever it was. He didn’t enjoy that. He didn’t like it.

As a matter of fact, he did what you or I as Christians ought to do, probably would do. He got down upon his knees and began to appeal to the Lord, concerning this I entreated the Lord three times that it might depart from me. His prayers were not casual, they were not careless, they were persistent. They were like our Lord’s in the Garden of Gethsemane who prayed three times, Lord, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me. And you can just see the apostle crying out thinking how significant it is that he be freed from the thorn to carry on his ministry.

Now, God did with Paul what he always does with Christians, he answered his prayer. Yes. That’s right. He answered his prayer. And he answered it the way many of you parents ought to answer you children’s request, too. He said, no! That’s it, N-O. No! But now you think that is bad, isn’t it, like you say I can remember as I’ve said to you more than once before when my father would say no to me and his no’s were really no’s. In fact, if he said no to me in his tone of voice, I never bothered to ask a second and third time. It was unnecessary. No, but I would go off and what I would say was, when I grow up, I’m not going to be a father like that. I’m not going to treat my children like that. And then later on, when I had some of those little demons running around, [laughter] I realized the wisdom of my father’s treatment of me.

So God answered his prayer. It was a no. But what he did was really answer it in a different way. He rejected Paul’s means of relief. Now, Paul’s means of relief was very simple. It’s the kind of thing that you and I would think about. I’ve got this thorn for the flesh, whatever it is, just remove it, may it leave me. That was his means of relief, that that the thorn should go. But God gave him better means. Because, you see, instead of substitution, that is instead of elimination of the thorn and the substitution of the freedom of being without the thorn, the Lord used the principle of transformation. So what he did was to leave the thorn but give Paul something better. That is sufficient grace to enjoy contentment in the midst of the thorn. That’s better. Because, you see, in this way he learns constantly that the Lord God’s grace is sufficient for him.

I think of Moody who once said “The only way to keep a broken vessel full is to keep it always under the tap.” And so Paul was kept under the tap. That is, he was constantly looking to the Lord for the grace that the Lord would supply him, that the power of God would constantly be evident in the life of Paul. And individuals looking at Paul would have a constant testimony of the power and grace of God. So God’s ways are so much better than our ways.

Now, in verses 9 and 10 the apostle writes about it and his own reaction. I love the way this 9th verse begins. It begins, “And he has said to me.” Now, if you were able to read the Greek text there, you would realize that this particular statement, he has said means he said this to Paul in the past, and the effects of it continue to the present time. In fact, “he has said” gives God standing answer to Paul’s request. That’s why he prayed only three times. He didn’t keep praying. He prayed three times. He got his standing answer, no, another way. It’s his unshakably firm answer. It’s his decision that is valid once and for all. He has said. What has he said? My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness. In other words, not weakness followed by grace, but grace amidst unremoved torment.

Paul’s no member of a breed of super-triumphalists like the Robinsons and the Bakkers and the Tiltens and others. Weakness is the vehicle of grace. God’s unmerited grace is never withdrawn from a believing man until he’s in the presence of the Lord, until the determined work in the life of an individual believer is finished, his grace is never withdrawn, and that grace flows out of the merits of Christ’s atoning sacrifice on Calvary’s cross. And, furthermore, it’s not perfected as Paul speaks about it here in this very passage. It’s not perfected until men praise God for it. Praise is the ultimate of the recognition of the good.

It’s just like when a man on the football field fades back and throws a fifty-year pass, and there’s touchdown. The thing is not over until the football saints turn to each other and say, wasn’t that magnificent? Wasn’t that magnificent? That’s the completion of

the work, the praise. That’s why the Bible tells us to praise God all the time. In effect, it’s telling us to appreciate what he has done. And when we appreciate what he has done, we complete what he intended to do. Manifest his power. Manifest his grace. Manifest all of the things that have to do with his character, and we’ve come to understand them and appreciate them and praise him for it.

Someone has called this the summit of Paul’s letter to the Corinthians. The reason that it’s the summit, in this author’s mind, is that this is the lofty peak from which everything else is viewed in proper proportion. The entire range of Paul’s apostleship is seen against this. His weaknesses, his trials, his calling, his conversion, his conquest, his exaltations, all fall into place if we remember that he has come to understand that God’s grace is sufficient for him, for power is perfected in weakness. And therefore he’ll boast, as he says. I will boast in weakness that the power of Christ may dwell upon me.

No joyless theology of insecurity like the saints of the middle ages had who did all kinds of things to themselves in order that they might demonstrate their holiness, such as in Luther’s day who said he carried out all of the kinds of monkery that was characteristic of the time, but couldn’t find any sense of the enjoyment of the Lord God or any sense of forgiveness of sins. The apostle boasts in his weakness that the power of Christ may rest upon him.

Further, that Christ may dwell in him in the sense of being tabernacled over protecting him and keeping him. Because after all, when he says Christ may tabernacle in me, tabernacle suggests the God of the Old Testament, Yahweh, the God of the Covenant, the God of the promises, the God of God’s favor, the God of divine power, all of this found in the Lord Jesus Christ who is the Yahweh of the Old Testament. And so I’m not surprised he said, I am well content with weakness, with insults, with distresses and persecutions, with difficulties for Christ’s sake, not because I have disobeyed him, but for Christ’s sake the things I experience for Christ’s sake I’m content in those things. As a matter of fact, the word means something like I find pleasure in them. Because when I’m

weak, then I’m strong, for Christ’s sake. He’s no masochist, but everything depends upon the recognition of the Lord God in them.

Now, I want to conclude. The time is up. I’m sure that clock is fast. But nevertheless it says twelve. Cowboys are not playing today. Relax you men.

It’s not wrong to cry out to God. It’s not wrong to do that. When things transpire that are tragic as we understand them, it’s not wrong to go to your room get down upon your knees and cry out to God. He may answer you with a yes, but he may answer also with a no. The Lord Jesus is the illustration. In Gethsemane he got down upon his knees, he fell upon his knees and then he cried out, and the writer of the Epistle of the Hebrews has another insight that the gospels do not have. They said he prayed and he prayed, O my Father if it be possible you can see the eagerness in that prayer, the earnestness of it, the crying to the Lord God.

But the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews when he describes this says he cried out with strong crying and tears. Hebrews chapter 5 in verse 7, “With strong crying and tears,” there is nothing wrong in crying out to the Lord. In fact, there is everything right about it. Our Lord did it, the apostle did it, the prophets did it, the saints of God have done it down through the years. And when the no answer comes, look for God in his marvelous grace to manifest himself by a different means that he might be glorified.

You know, I find so many things in our society that are hard to understand. The word of God has so much for us. Now, I’m not going to suggest that there’s never a time when any individual should go to a psychiatrist or a psychologist, but, you know, I have had Christian psychologists like John White tell me the problem today is with the preachers; that they don’t realize what they can do.

I received, not too long ago, an advertisement from a psychologist who was asking for business, and I don’t blame him for that. He wanted some business from you, that is you sitting out in the audience. He said depression is something Christians experience, which no doubt is true. He said, as a matter of fact Christians get depressed

much the same way as unbelievers do. I said, wait a minute. Wait a minute now. There is a difference, you know.

So he said look let’s take a look at the 22nd Psalm. Now, this is the exposition of the Christian psychologist. He says five primary symptoms of depression are all here. First of all, the psalmist was sad and hopeless. This is the 22nd Psalm, mind you, in which the psalmist begins with “My God, my God why hast thou forsaken me?” It’s a Psalm that refers to the Lord Jesus Christ ultimately on Calvary’s cross. In other words he says, sad and hopeless. Look the reason the psalmist says, why are you so far from my groanings, O my God I cry out by day and you do not answer, is because God is withdrawn, the distress that he is experiencing is the distress at best of death. That’s not a fellow who is sad and hopeless in the superficial sense. And furthermore in it he prays. He prays in the midst of it.

Loss of energy. Now, mind you, how can he find loss of energy and my strength is dried up like a potsherd. This man is dying. It’s the experience of people who die physically, that that is one of the things they experience, lack of moisture. The experience is far more than loss of energy. I must go down and lie on the sofa. I don’t feel like getting up. That’s not what the psalmist is talking about. It’s so shallow.

Loss of appetite. My tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth. Can you believe that? He finds that in my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth. This is true of the extremes of misery. Dryness of tongue. Here’s a man who is dying as the psalmist describes it.

Sleep difficulties, I cry out by day and by night and am not silent. Listen. This man is not crying out because he has insomnia, he’s talking about death, the experiences of life.

And finally, and this is the most ridiculous of all, loss of interest in pleasure. I don’t have any interest in pleasing myself any longer, and I’m so depressed over it. Where does he find that? “My heart has turned to wax. It is melted away within me.” Can you imagine that? This is the Psalm in which the psalmist says, Thou hast appointed me,

put me to death. As a matter of fact, thou hast pierced my hands and my feet is probably the rendering. And furthermore, it’s our Lord himself who cites the Psalm on the cross at Calvary. “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” The experience is one that is similar to crucifixion, if not the crucifixion itself.

And, furthermore, and this is, to my mind, inexcusable on this particular individual, in this very Psalm in which the psalmist is detailing his problems he tells us in the 21st verse, “From the horns of the wild oxen, thou hast -- (It’s the perfect tense in the Hebrew) thou hast answered me. What he’s telling in the Psalm is not so much his problems as his terrible experience and how God met him in the midst of it and answered his prayers, and then he goes on the talk about worldwide blessing to the four corners of the earth because this God is the God who cannot only answer my need but actually will bring the kingdom of God to the face of the earth.

It’s amazing that in the word of God we have all of the remedies that he thinks he may supply and done by a better physician. You can be sure of that. And furthermore, he also sent me a list of his charges, a lot cheaper, my Christian friends.

So I conclude then with simply this. I want you to understand, I do think there are times when it’s good to have a Christian psychiatrist if only for the fact that we as simple believers, we cannot take someone to the hospital and make arrangements for them in their certain forms of disease if we should call that disease -- I’m not smart enough to know that -- to which we cannot minister those who have special training can. But in the meantime in the word of God we have that which is sufficient for us. The instinctive right tendency to see in the inconclusive identification of Paul’s thorn, our own particular ones is certainly true. God’s ear is not heavy, his arm is not shortened, he saves.

The great French mystic Madam Gion wrote to a suffering friend, “Ah if you know what power there is in an accepted sorrow.”

So we don’t know Paul’s thorn in the flesh, why? Because every thorn for the flesh that you and I have, whatever we have, whatever we think it might be, it’s covered by the principles that the apostle speaks about. You may cry to God, you may expect him to answer your petitions, and you may expect him through his means to meet your need, that’s what the word of God says. The Scriptures as they reveal our Lord, reveal a God who is sufficient for us.

There is a remarkable little story of a Christian man of the last century. He was going through a terrible experience, and he went into his room, and he did the same thing that you and I do or should do, he got down upon his knees and he cried out to the Lord. I don’t remember whether it was in his room or just a room where he was. But after he had agonized over the problem that he had, his eyes were wet with tears, and he opened them up and from his teary eyes he looked and over on the wall there was a text of Scripture, and it was as you might expect my grace is sufficient for thee. But the interesting thing about it is that the “is” was written in such a way that is stood out. My grace *is* sufficient for thee. It’s a present tense incidentally. It is sufficient as then so now and so forever, my grace is sufficient for thee. It’s an everlasting present tense. It’s sufficient and, my Christian friends, it’s for me and it’s for thee.

May God help us to listen to the apostle and cry to the Lord in the problems of life and find what he finds that power is completed in weakness, and that’s God’s grace is sufficient for us in the experiences of life. Paul experienced this for the rest of his life, but he found in the midst of his experience the grace and the contentment that God desires that we all have in our problems.

If you are here today and you’ve never believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, you don’t have this hope. You may go to your professional men but that’s all. The ultimate remedy is with the Lord God. We invite you, as an ambassador of the Lord Jesus, to remember his death on Calvary’s cross for sinners. We are all sinners, flee to him. Receive the

forgiveness of sins, the presence of the Lord Jesus through the spirit in your life and the right and privilege of going directly to the great physician, the Lord God himself.

Let’s stand for the benediction.

[Prayer] Father, we are grateful to Thee for these experiences that the apostle had. And we know that deep minds do not like to unfold some of the secrets of life. But we thank Thee that the apostle was forced to do it by the circumstances in Corinth, and we’ve learned one of the greatest of the lessons of life, My grace is sufficient for Thee.

For Jesus’ sake. Amen.