

Seventh Sunday of Epiphany
February 19, 2006
2 Corinthians 12:1-10

Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke

When God's Answer Is No, Remember:

1. The thorn comes from God
2. His power is made perfect in weakness
3. His grace is sufficient for us

NIV 2 Corinthians 12:1 I must go on boasting. Although there is nothing to be gained, I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord. 2 I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know-- God knows. 3 And I know that this man-- whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows-- 4 was caught up to paradise. He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell. 5 I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses. 6 Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool, because I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain, so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say. 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.

Brothers and Sisters in Christ Jesus,

God answers every prayer a believer prays. We believe that because that's God's promise. He says, "**Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you and you will honor me.**" (Ps. 50:15) We believe that because of Jesus. By his death and resurrection he opened the way for us to bring our prayers to the very throne of God.

But while it's true that God answers every prayer offered in Jesus' name, he has never promised that the answer to every prayer will be "Yes." He *always* answers our prayers, but he does so in his own time and his own way. Sometimes God does answer our prayers immediately, giving us precisely what we requested. But there are other times when his answer is, "Not right now." As Jesus did with the Canaanite woman, he doesn't give us what we asked for immediately, but asks us to wait patiently and pray persistently. As he said in the Sermon on the Mount,

“Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.” (Matt. 7:7)

It’s also possible, of course, that God’s answer to our prayer will be “No.” The foremost Bible example of a “No” answer to a prayer is here in today’s epistle lesson. The apostle Paul was suffering from what he called “a thorn in the flesh.” It was apparently a painful ailment of some kind. Speculation about the nature of this thorn runs the gamut: from malaria to epilepsy to an eye disease. In the end, we don’t know what this thorn in the flesh was. It was clearly something that Paul viewed as a hindrance to his ministry. And it was something that he pleaded with the Lord repeatedly to take away from him. And God’s answer to Paul was “No. No I am not going to pull that thorn out of your flesh.”

Most of us have had similar experiences. We prayed for some kind of relief. It didn’t come. We prayed again and again, but still nothing changed. Finally, it became clear to us that God’s answer was “No.” What did we do then? Get angry with God? Quit serving him? Quit praying? Here in 2 Corinthians, Paul suggests a better course when God’s answer is “No.” It begins with remembering that the thorn comes from God.

1. The thorn comes from God

Paul writes, *“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.”* We don’t always know why God says “No” to some of our prayers, but here Paul *does* know. It’s to keep him humble. Earlier Paul told us that God gave him a rare privilege. Paul “was caught up to the third heaven.” That is, not the heaven where the birds fly, nor the heaven where the stars shine, but the heaven where God lives and where believers go when they die. He calls it Paradise. He can’t tell us much about what was revealed to him there, but it must have been amazing. And it no doubt served as a source of strength to Paul during his missionary travels. When he said as he did earlier in this letter that **“our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all,”** he spoke from experience.

But here’s where there can be a problem: Imagine that you are the one person on the face of the earth who has gotten a tour of heaven. Even though you can’t begin to describe what you saw, you realize that you alone have been given this surpassingly great revelation. Don’t you think that you might be tempted to be a little conceited about what you’ve seen? And pride was definitely a sin that Paul had wrestled with earlier in his life. He tells us how proud he was of his Jewish bloodlines and of his accomplishments as an up-and-coming young Pharisee and of his legalistic righteousness (Php. 3) God didn’t want pride to be the ruin of his apostle, so he gave him this thorn in the flesh.

Maybe you’re thinking: Are we sure *God* gave it to him? Doesn’t Paul call his thorn “a messenger of Satan”? Doesn’t he say that this thorn tormented him? Would God do that to one of his children? Maybe this is just Satan’s doing. But

think about the ramifications of saying that. If Satan can do what God doesn't want him to do, then Satan—at least some of the time—gets the upper hand on God. Then our God is a God who, at least some of the time, has to stand by and sorrowfully wish he could have done something to prevent us from feeling the pain we're feeling, but he can't do it. No, that won't do. God is almighty. There's nothing he can't do. More often than we know, God *does* keep evil from us. But there are times when, in his wisdom, God allows us something that *appears to be* evil to touch us. (God is not the author of evil! He's holy, entirely separate from evil.) It may be to draw us closer to him. It may be to keep us humble. It may be to discipline us. But for one reason or another, God allows Satan to afflict us with something that appears to be evil. And then God uses it for our good. As he promised, **“In all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”** (Rom. 8:28) How it must infuriate Satan to see God take Satan's most devious temptations and turn them to good for the sake of his people!

So, then, when God's answer is “No,” we should believe that this isn't just a case of God not hearing what we asked or not being able to give us what we requested. “No” is his wise and gracious answer to our prayer. God's “No” is intended for our good just as much as his “Yes” is. But he gives us a promise to carry with us as when he tells us “No.” The promise is that his power is made perfect in weakness.

2. His power is made perfect in weakness

Paul says here, *“Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’* I don't doubt that this thorn in the flesh, whatever it was, made Paul feel weak. It may have incapacitated him. It may have hindered him or laid him low. It surely placed some kind of limitation on him. And Paul, quite understandably, believed that he'd be better off without this thorn, so he pleaded with Jesus to take it away.

But God knew better. Oh, I know: We all like to feel strong and confident. We want to feel skilled at our work and capable in our domestic responsibilities. We like to feel that we're just a bit smarter than the other guy or other gal. We can handle it. We can take care of things. But that belief in the sufficiency of our own strength is an illusion just waiting to be shattered. Sooner or later we all come up against something that we can't handle on our own. An illness. An injury. A loss. A failure of some kind. If we've spent our lives too proud to confess “I need thy presence ev'ry passing hour,” and acted as if we need no Savior to be our Guide and Stay, then it's likely that in our hour of great need we will be all alone. Jesus came to heal the sick. Those who thought they weren't sick had no use for him. Jesus came to strengthen the weak. But those who think they're already strong won't avail themselves of his help.

It's like this: Which do you think is stronger—my own strength or Jesus' strength working through my weakness? Jesus didn't want Paul's ministry as an apostle

to be a testimony to Paul's strength, but rather a manifestation of God's strength. That's why he put his beautiful, saving gospel in the fragile clay vessels that are human messengers. His power is made perfect in weakness. Our God is the one who laid the foundations of the earth, Job said (Ch. 38). He gives orders to the morning and shows the dawn its place. The day is coming when he's going to take the earth by the edges and shake the wicked out of it. He is God Almighty and he's placed at our disposal the same power by which he raised Jesus from the dead. When my strength is Jesus' strength working in me, that's when I'm really strong.

So God's power is a comfort to me. I may be weak, but Jesus is strong. But there's more comfort to be had in these verses—particularly in that little phrase, *“My grace is sufficient for you.”*

3. His grace is sufficient for us

Grace is a beautiful, comforting word. It speaks to us of God's superabundant love. It's not based on our merit or attractiveness, but solely on God's mercy for sinners. Paul began this letter speaking of grace—**“Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.”** (1:2) And Paul ends this letter speaking of God's grace—**“The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.”** (13:14)

For Paul, it was all about grace. He writes in 1 Corinthians 15, **“For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am.”** Grace called him from his ignorant persecution of Christians to be an apostle of Christ. Grace equipped him for the rigors of that ministry. Grace enabled him to persevere in the most trying circumstances—the ones detailed in the early portion of today's epistle lesson. And grace enabled him to continue serving as God's apostle even with that thorn in his flesh.

As believers in Jesus Christ, our story is the same. It's all about grace. We live surrounded by this grace. The physical blessings we enjoy each day are due to God's grace. The forgiveness we seek and find in Christ Jesus is due alone to the grace of our Savior. The fact that we confess Jesus to be our Savior is due to the gracious working of the Holy Spirit in water and the Word. By God's grace we confidently count ourselves the heirs of heaven. And if and when we are called upon to deal with some painful thorn in the flesh—some adversity that we'd much rather be without—God's grace will be sufficient for us.

You've heard the saying, “Man proposes, God disposes.” But what happens when God disposes what I've proposed? That is, what happens when God says “No” to our petitions? Rather than questioning God's wisdom or his love, the Bible urges us to recognize that God has good reasons for not giving us what we've asked for. More than that, his power in our weakness and his all-sufficient grace will see us through. Amen.