

SERMON -- SEXAGESIMA -- 2 CORINTHIANS 12:7-10

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ
Amen.

“And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And He said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.’” Thus far our text.

Pain is not something that we look forward to in our lives. During my many years serving as a parish pastor, I cannot remember anyone saying to me that they were looking forward to the pain and suffering associated with a surgery that they were about to undergo. Rather, the only reason that some of them were able to be optimistic was because of the long-term benefits that they hoped to reap by having the surgery performed. Their long-term view, rather than the short-term reality, was what kept them going. Those whom I spoke with who were apprehensive or downright depressed by the surgery that they were about to endure did not have this long-term focus. Paul says much the same thing in our text when he is writing to the Corinthian people. God had revealed to him that the world that we live in is rife with sin and death. The short-term picture doesn't look very good at all. However, God promises that He will give us the strength that we need to get through the suffering of this world, and bring us to Himself in heaven when our earthly days are over. The reason for this world's condition is that the devil is

“prowling around like a lion, seeking someone to devour.” The devil would have us react differently to Paul, and dwell on our infirmities, and ultimately blame God for allowing them to happen. However, Paul makes it clear in our text that pain and suffering are allowed, not willed, by God, but for His purpose. God allows suffering to occur to strengthen our reliance upon Him, and to put to death our sinful reliance on ourselves. Moreover, He allows this pain to come into our lives so that His name can be glorified, and by so doing, cause more people to stop rejecting the truth of His Word. This difference between being earthly and heavenly focused is what Paul is getting at in our text for this morning.

Twice in one sentence, Paul talks about this thorn in the flesh and why he thinks that he has it. We aren't given specifics as to what this thorn in the flesh could be by our text or other contemporary evidence. Perhaps it was a “stitch” in his side; perhaps it was some gastrointestinal disorder; perhaps it was some other physical ailment. Whatever the case, we are told quite clearly that Paul wished it to go away. He dwells in this passage on the thorn quite greatly, and prays to God to remove it from him. However, Paul also realizes throughout this passage that God's will is the best for him in his life. If God allowed it to be there, then it was there to fulfill God's will. Paul speculates that the thorn was placed there so that he would remain humble, and not puff himself up with pride over the faith that he had. Paul was right in this assumption – humility is the mark of God that He wishes us to have. It would not have been a far extension on Paul's part to think that he was above temptation and arrogance. After all, God was speaking to him directly, and was guiding him every step of the way. However, God's purpose in allowing the devil to place the thorn in Paul's flesh was to guard Paul against forgetting

his constant need for confession and absolution, and the calling that he had received to be humble. After all, the gifts of steadfastness and faith come from God, not from our own strength. Therefore, it behooves us to remain thankful to Him for His gifts, and not try to substitute our own merits into the equation.

If we were left at this point in the text, with Paul being allowed to suffer by God, we could draw the conclusion that we really cannot trust God to help us out. After all, even when Paul pleaded to God three times to remove the pain from him, God said no. But, this wasn't where God left things. He responded by saying to Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." What a wonderful statement! The promise in these words is staggering to read. God tells us that He will be all that we need and all that we require. We don't have to worry about anything, because He is our sufficiency and our hope. It echoes Paul's writing to the Philippians, when faced with the possibilities of life or death, when he writes, "For me, to live is Christ and to die is gain." Therefore, if I die, I will be with Christ, and if I go on living, I will continue to spread the Gospel. "What shall I choose? I do not know." Both alternatives are good. The same is true for us. We have the hope that no matter what happens to us in this life, we have the hope of heaven to come. This is what I was getting at earlier, when we need to understand God's long-term focus, rather than our short-term one. He is speaking about being our sufficiency in the world to come, and gives us the power, strength and faith to be there with Him. We ask for things in this world that don't matter in the world to come. God's words of being our sufficiency are powerful, and they are truth.

But, He doesn't stop there when reminding Paul of His complete sufficiency. He continues, "For my power has been made perfect in weakness." Throughout this passage, everything that Paul has gone through, and every pain that he has endured, were surpassed by the pain and suffering that our Savior endured on the cross for our salvation. He came down from heaven, suffered and died for the sins of the whole world, without committing one sin Himself. He did this out of His love for us. The ability to endure such pain without regard for Himself was only possible out of His great humility and willingness to save us. Therefore, in the weakness of Christ, we are able to be glorified by Him. Not only does God comfort Paul (and us) with the statement that He will be all that we need, but He points us to the cross of Christ, where our salvation was won once and for all time. In Isaiah, the entire gamut of the sufferings of Christ are detailed, with the refrain, "but He did not open His mouth." God is saying to Paul, and to all of us today, that the pains of this world do not compare to the sufferings of Christ. However, He also promises that those anguishes of Christ will serve to give us the hope of someday escaping this world of sin and death, to be with Him in heaven. Once again, we have the words of hope coming from God in heaven to us sinners here on earth, and His eternally focused perspective that is always in accord with His holy will.

But, this doesn't seem like hope to us. After all, it seems as if God is answering Paul's request by saying "NO", and then continuing on and saying that He is not going to do anything tangible about the problem. This happens to us many times in our lives, doesn't it? After all, we pray continually for something to happen, or to be given to us, and it doesn't come to pass. Or, we pray for something that we dread to not happen, and it happens anyway. We think that maybe God is not listening, or maybe we aren't good

enough in His sight to come to Him in prayer, or that we aren't praying hard enough, or that He really doesn't answer prayers, or all the host of other fallacies that the devil places in our hearts. But, we are told in this passage that God's grace is sufficient for us. What does this mean in our lives today? It doesn't mean that all of our difficulties in life are going to magically disappear. It doesn't mean that we are somehow going to wake up tomorrow and have no more worries, be they spiritual, financial or emotional. Rather, it means that God has a better goal in mind – the strengthening of our souls. If we think about it, isn't this better anyway? After all, the things of this world will pass away after a time, or at the very longest, at the end of the world. However, when we think about the things of heaven that are promised to us by faith in Christ, they will last forever. It is difficult for us to think of something lasting forever because we are locked in a world of endings. However, God does not live here, and He will take us to be with Him at the end of time. It is as simple and wonderful as that!

We should remember Paul's prayer, and God's response to his prayer, in our lives today. If we pray for something that is not of a spiritual nature, but of a temporal one, Martin Luther reminds us in his Small Catechism that we should pray for it "according to God's will." We do this because God's will supercedes our own, and is better than we can imagine. His knowledge is superior, and He knows whether the blessing for which we ask would be good for our faith, or cause harm to our faith. And, the faith is the most important concern in the grand scheme of things. We are too often clouded with the shortsightedness of our sinful condition. We do not see things with the perfect vision of our Savior. However, He points us to Himself, and faith in Him that gives us eternal life.

After all, we are only on earth for 80 years or so – shouldn't we rejoice in the fact that God's grace and sufficiency will last forever?

Paul's speaking about the thorn in the flesh resounds with us today, especially as we prepare to enter the season of Lent in just a couple of weeks. During our Lenten journey, we lament our sinful condition, repent of our sins, and receive God's absolution. Because of the sinful nature of this world that clings to us like glue, we too have things in our lives that are not very pleasant. This sinful world around us is full of pain and suffering. One needs to look no further than the nearest hospital or nursing home, or even around this church. All of us are suffering from some malady of body or soul. However, Paul's discourse with God is illustrative for us today. Rather than being short-sighted, and praying for our own wills to be done and have the pains removed from us, we should ask God for these things of a temporal nature with the condition, "if it be Your will." Otherwise, we are substituting our own will for the will of God, which is just plain wrong! We would be falling into the error that Paul was trying to avoid, that of puffing up our own intellect and ourselves. But, we remember the love of God for us sinful men, and that he has done everything for us, and this grace is sufficient for us to live this life in the hope of the eternal life to come. He came to earth to cause our salvation to come about – by His suffering, death and resurrection that we will revisit and recount during this Passion season – from Ash Wednesday, through Lent, to Good Friday and, ultimately, at the Resurrection of our Lord. He promises that He will redeem us from this sinful world that we live in, and take us to be with Him in heaven, where there will be no more pain or suffering. He is everything that we need, because of His suffering, death and resurrection. He endured the pains of death so that we wouldn't have to experience

them. His grace is sufficient for us, and He even gives us the power to trust in Him through the words written by Paul, and the Holy Spirit in our hearts. Thanks be to God for His love for us, and the complete sufficiency of His atonement. Amen.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which surpasses all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Savior and Lord. Amen.