

“Grace Sufficient in Weakness”

2 Corinthians 12:2-20, Mark 6:1-13

Life at times may seem to cast us into situations in which we feel alone, out there by ourselves facing a tough battle or an overwhelming challenge.

It may be a decision about our future, a family struggle, an illness plaguing us. It may be confronting a moral dilemma or facing a troubling task at work or school. It may be a heavy responsibility we have accepted. It may involve an injustice in the world oppressing us or calling us to act for the sake of others.

Whatever the situation, feelings may envelop us: isolation, loneliness, fear and anxiety, a sense of being “out there” in the struggle all by ourselves.

Such may have been the feelings that gripped the apostle Paul who was being challenged publicly by people in the Corinthian church as well as being plagued with a personal problem within himself.

First, a group of “super-Christians” in Corinth had slandered Paul questioning the authenticity of his apostleship and ministry, and the gospel he was preaching. Secondly, Paul was struggling with an inward malady which he described as “a thorn in the flesh.” He could not overcome this agonizing problem. He had to live with it.

Over the centuries, biblical scholars have speculated on the nature of this thorn. Diagnoses have ranged from the physical to the emotional to the spiritual. Was it epilepsy, headaches, eye-trouble, malaria, depression, a severe temptation, lingering guilt over his past? Most likely, we will never know.

Then there is Jesus. He must have felt a sense of isolation, indeed, rejection, as he discovered people in his hometown taking offense at him, questioning his authority, criticizing his actions. Neighbors could not believe that this carpenter they had known from birth possessed special gifts or powers.

Jesus also must have experienced a severe sense of being “out there alone” during the final days of his life leading up to the crucifixion, as he agonized in prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, saw his disciples fade into the background, and died in agony on the cross.

Less dramatic yet equally real was a life-changing experience of a couple about whom I read, who felt deep anxiety when a phone call came informing Kaley Straatsma that her sister, Mariley, had died of kidney disease. Mariley’s husband had died three years earlier in a fire. Four young sons of the couple now were without parents.

The Straatsmas lived with their three children in a small home on a lake near Kalamazoo. Suddenly, they found their family of five transformed into a family of nine, for Mariley’s will named her sister and brother-in-law the legal guardians.

The Straatsma children were eight, three and two. The couple was faced with the challenge of adding to their family a nine year old boy and a set of six year old triplets, one of whom was born without an esophagus and had suffered a stroke shortly after birth. He lived on a feeding tub and required total care.

The children were placed temporarily in a child center. One option was foster care placement. Although overwhelmed and frightened by the challenge confronting them, the Straatmas soon decided what they would do.

As Kaley Straatsma related: “We sat down with each other and saw there were criteria for Mariley’s kids. Number one was the kids are not going to be split up. The other was that they be raised in a spiritually nourishing, loving atmosphere....” She added: “We looked at ourselves and decided we could do it.” (1)

After spending a week in Sterling Heights arranging to move the children to their home near Kalamazoo, the Straatsmas arrived home to discover a host of people had come to their aid.

Friends and neighbors had washed their windows, mowed their lawn, donated clothes and shoes for the children. Co-workers of Bob Straatsma had drawn up plans for expanding their home to accommodate the new family members.

Kaley Straatsma offered these words about the continuing challenge before them: “The only way we can do this is to know we’re not out there by ourselves.” (2)

Now you and I may not be faced with such a dramatic situation in our own lives, but we may face overwhelmingly difficult challenges that may tax our physical, emotional and spiritual strengths. In our own situations, you and I may need assurance that we are not “out there by ourselves.”

I have no other information about the Straatsma family other than what I read in the newspaper article. But it seems clear to me that a part of their assurance came through the people who came to their aid in a rather desperate situation.

I also have a sense that faith played a part in their assurance, for the couple clearly spoke about raising the children “...in a spiritually nourishing, loving atmosphere....”

The apostle Paul as well as Jesus discovered a spiritually nourishing atmosphere in facing their own challenges, if not always with the support of others around them, then at least and most importantly through the presence of God with them.

God’s gift of grace sustained Paul during his life and ministry, particularly in dealing with the “thorn” with which he lived.

Canadian theologian, Douglas John Hall, notes: “fortunately” Paul “did not identify more explicitly” (3) this thorn in the flesh. He explains:

I say “fortunately” because Paul’s point would be lost if the problem to which he alludes were narrowly defined. Whatever his (or our) particular “thorn,” what it betokens (that is, suggests) is a lack of self-sufficiency, the knowledge of which makes the human being open to undeserved and unearnable grace. (4).

The word of God came to Paul saying: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” This grace sustained the apostle in his life and ministry, particularly in dealing with “the thorn,” whatever it was. This grace enabled Paul to endure in the other challenges he encountered.

In Jesus we discover the grace of God working as he made an honest response to the hometown skeptics. He accepted their doubt of him and his power. He did not attempt to manipulate the townspeople, do something to gain their favor. He endured their doubt and moved on with his life and mission.

Jesus faced the reality and accepted the offense he was to some of the people he encountered. He accepted his lack of power to change certain situations. He offered the same advice to the disciples. If they were not welcomed and their message was refused in any place, they were to accept the situation and move on.

Jesus remained faithful to his mission to suffer for humanity, to place himself in their place, and act to show them a love that was totally giving and forgiving. There would be no retribution for refusal to follow his way.

In no situation in life is success guaranteed –not for Jesus or Paul, not for people like the Straatsmas, as well as you and me, and countless others in this world.

Success is not guaranteed for anyone of us as we struggle with disease, distress, emotional upheaval, poverty, hateful attitudes of others, injustices, rejection, you name it. The guarantee we have is the faithfulness of God to work in grace in our lives.

Grace works its way in our weakness, not necessarily or only in our strength. As the apostle Paul put it:” ...for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.”

Or as Jesus dealt with the reality he confronted in his hometown, that “...he could do no deed of power there...” He showed through the cross that suffering and dying for the sake of others, not a glorious deed of power, is the way to life.

So for you and me. God is with us in grace in our weakness, our failure, in the overwhelming challenges that may arouse a sense of being in the battle alone.

Always, there is this affirming assurance. God is with us in grace: grace sufficient for the battle; grace working in our weakness; grace giving us strength in our weakness.

Yes, God is with you and me in grace and very often, others are with us, too, empowered by this same grace.

(1) Associated Press article, “Tragedy brings family a handful,” Lansing State Journal, Thursday, July 7, 1994, p. 4B

(2) Ibid.

(3) Douglas John Hall, The Cross in Our Context, Augsburg Fortress, Minneapolis, 2003, p. 82.

(4) Ibid., Footnote No. 8, p.239.

