

Suffering and God's sufficiency though His grace

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[0 : 0 0] morning again and we're going to continue now our journey which we're almost finished through second corinthians some say this is one of paul's most personal letters and we've already seen over the last few months how much he does open up about his own experiences and his own lessons that he's learned in his time as an apostle and today's passage is no different he's going to get very personal when he talks about his own sufferings and weaknesses so let's pray and ask for god's help as we look at this passage together and expect god to feed us through it lord we do thank you that we can gather freely still in our country and read your word we ask lord as we do that now that you would speak to us we pray that you would use your word to again work in our lives by your grace to challenge us correct us where we need correcting change us transform us into the likeness of christ work on our hearts and our minds to grow us to be the people you want us to be the church you want us to be to glorify your name and so we pray speak to us in jesus name this morning amen okay so who of us um knows the comic strip peanuts with charlie brown lucy snoopy you know you know that comic strip well there was a there was a peanuts comic that went like this lucy comes and asks a glum looking charlie brown what he's worrying about charlie says i feel inferior lucy replies oh you shouldn't worry about that lots of people have that feeling charlie asks what that they're inferior lucy replies no that you're inferior i think we all sometimes feel like charlie brown don't we and it of course doesn't help having friends like lucy but even if we've got the best friends in the world i think everyone has those times where we feel inferior we feel inadequate about something at some time right whether it's a feeling of spiritual inadequacy not being as holy or as good as we'd like to be or a mental inadequacy not being as clever or being able to think as quick or read as quick or whatever as we might like to or physical inadequacy not being as strong or successful or good looking as we would like to now we may ignore these feelings of inadequacy or try to cover them up but we can never totally avoid feeling inferior feeling inadequate and to be honest the reason is because we are inadequate if we're honest with ourselves we're fallen sinful human beings and so by nature will never in this life be the people we should be and so there will always no matter how much we try to ignore it there will always be this underlying sense of inadequacy and no matter how much we try to convince ourselves otherwise and convince other people otherwise it'll always be there and it's funny isn't it the the people who are often the strongest on the outside are sometimes the most insecure on the inside and you can see this for example at a gym now i'm not saying everyone who goes to gym has psychological problems but i have experienced and i i know people who have admitted this to me that guys often who work out in the gym to get really big muscles often are making up for a deep sense of insecurity in other areas and i think it's not just people who go to gym we all have ways of trying to compensate for insecurities our inadequacy that we all feel deep down inside

now why am i talking about this well because the theme of inadequacy the theme of being weak and that's what weakness really is it's in it's a it's a lack of adequacy to to be able to achieve something to do something or to be the person you want to be this theme of weakness is a major theme throughout the whole letter of second corinthians we've already come across it and paul as the apostle is all too aware of his weaknesses and the corinthians are all too aware of his weaknesses as well and that's one of the big problems that underlies why he writes this letter uh and as gary alluded to earlier you've got these strong impressive teachers false teachers in corinth at the time who look very um all together they don't they don't show they don't portray any weaknesses in themselves and the corinthians are very impressed with them very attracted to them but paul on the other hand looks quite weak um that he's not on top of everything and so that's why he one of the reasons he writes this letter to them to correct that but this passage he talks specifically about some of his weaknesses and what he does here is rather than trying to cover up

his weaknesses he actually shows that they're not a bad thing in fact he ends up in the passage if you were listening he ends up by saying that his weaknesses are actually his strengths which is just weird um but in doing so in saying that and that's the that's kind of where he's building up that's the climax of this passage that when i'm weak then i am strong and the passage is explaining how that can be and by doing that it teaches us a very important lesson about how christians should view their weaknesses and the way we as christians believers should view our weaknesses is very different to how people who are not believers view their weaknesses and so it's a very valuable passage for any of us who are all too aware of our weaknesses now if you never feel inadequate if you don't believe you have any weaknesses then feel free um to go do something else but i don't think anyone here is in that position i think this has something to say to each one of us this morning so let's go through it um it begins with a very strange one of the strangest passages in scripture i must admit a very strange supernatural experience paul had have a look from uh verse two i know a man in christ who 14 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 and i know that this man whether in the body or apart from the body i do not know but god knows was caught up to paradise and heard inexpressible things things that no one is permitted to tell okay so apparently paul doesn't want to talk about this and even if he did want to he couldn't because no one is permitted to tell what he heard and he by the way he's talking about himself it's weird that he's talking about a person in the in the third person talking about a man but the reason he's doing this it's a it's a way of expressing that he is so dead set against boasting about himself that all he's willing to do is boast about this other person which is him which is clear in the passage later but it's it's a way of saying listen i don't want to do this and you can see you can feel his restraint in writing this but what he's what he's doing is because all of these false teachers in corinth are so into self-boasting and the corinthians are so taken by it he has to in this section of the letter chapter 11 and 12 for a little while resort to their tactics to make a point that if he had to boast he could actually out qualify them in all of the areas that they are boasting about so in chapter 11 we saw last week the jewish their jewish qualifications their jewish pedigree paul uh they they you know boast about their jewish qualifications paul says you know what i out qualify them if i had to boast about that and here he's doing the same thing with spiritual experiences uh so just like they boasted about receiving these mystical experiences and that was very actually i was going to say it was very popular back then but it's very popular today as well isn't it you see books of people about having gone to heaven and their experiences and that's how they sell books and lots of teachers gather a crowd by boasting about their mystical experiences well it was no different back then that's what the false teachers in corinth were doing and paul therefore says you know what they want to boast about their mystical experiences well i've also had pretty incredible experiences let me tell you about it and he then describes the strange experience that god gave him 14 years before uh interestingly enough if you trace the chronology of paul's life from his conversion in damascus and then you follow through acts all the things he did in his career there's 10 years that are missing you don't read anything about paul sort of in the 14th 40 up to like 52 ad thereabouts and you don't you don't read anything about what was paul what paul was doing during that time and 14 years before he wrote uh two corinthians was smack bang in the middle of that mysterious time so we don't quite know what was going on and we don't quite know what this weird experience that god gave him is but he describes you know going up to the third heaven going up to paradise hearing inexpressible things now we're going to go into more detail in our growth groups in this so if you want to know what the third heaven is come to growth groups i'm not going to give it away but what's important for us this morning to notice is that he doesn't put any major significance on it he doesn't focus on that it's actually just in passing and he doesn't even refer to himself in the first person because whatever he's learned there he's not allowed to say anyway and also he doesn't want people to put him on any kind of pedestal because of it look at verse 6 he says but i refrain so that no one will think more of me than is warranted by what i do or say he doesn't want them to be drawn to the wrong thing he doesn't want them to be drawn to him as a person and a person that's had mystical experiences he wants them to be drawn to his message he almost wants to be invisible and he wants his message about jesus to shine forth and that's why he doesn't want to boast about these things or go into details but what you read on is that what paul is far more happy to boast about just like the last passage is what his sufferings his weaknesses so it's the same pattern as we saw in the last passage chapter 11 he starts by boast you know chapter 11 he started by boasting about his uh jewish heritage but very soon changed the subject to boast about his persecutions and his

weaknesses and his sufferings well he does the same thing here he starts to boast about his mystical experiences to make the point that he could if he wanted to but then he very quickly changes the subject to talk about his sufferings because they the sufferings rather than his mystical experiences they qualify him to teach us about the truth of god and god's grace and power better than anything else qualifies him and that's his point and then from verse 7 on he explains why and this is this is the passage that where we get to learn a true christian view of our sufferings and weaknesses and so there's a few important lessons that i want you to see from verse 7 onwards that teach us what we learn about suffering firstly the first lesson is that suffering is from god and satan suffering is from god and satan look at verse 7 he he uh towards the end he says because of these surpassingly great revelations

therefore in order to keep me from becoming conceited i was given a thorn in my flesh a messenger of satan to torment me okay so in order to prevent paul from becoming proud about his supernatural experience that god gave him he was given what he calls a thorn in the flesh now he's probably talking about a physical weakness or an ailment or a recurring sickness it could have been malaria it could have been an eye problem uh and he had this probably to the end of his life he mentioned something similar in galatians he talks about his physical trial that we don't know for sure what he's talking about but what he says about it whatever it was he says it was given to him supposedly by god to protect him from pride to protect him from becoming conceited so at the same time uh god gave him this supernatural experience god also gave him this thorn in the flesh as a safety to protect him from becoming too proud about his supernatural experience all right so he says it was given to him and yet he also calls it a messenger of satan as if satan sent it so the question is who did the suffering that paul was under who did that come from god or satan and the answer is both as is the case with all suffering in life satan is the root cause of suffering and and he he's the one who designs all the horrible things in this world that causes us to suffer and satan wants us to suffer humans in general but especially god's people because suffering is the way that he tempts us away from god and he always has used suffering as a main instrument to take god's people away from him to cause them to drift away and he's in the business of of using suffering in that way like with job we read job earlier right and we read job's a fascinating book because we actually get to see behind the scenes for a little bit and we see that satan wanted job to suffer he asked god permission to cause job to suffer and he told him the reason because he wanted to prove that job wasn't really devoted to god he wanted job to fall away from devotion to god and that's why he wanted job to experience suffering and you see this throughout the the threat of suffering to people who are devoted to god so remember the seed and the sow the parable that we looked at last week and we learned that some see jesus says falls on rocky or thorny ground and he said those are people who believe for a time but then persecution or suffering or anxiety about worldly things cause them to fall away and so suffering difficulties anxiety those things those trials in life satan uses them to try get people to fall away to stop trusting god but god is smarter than that and god we discover throughout scripture god is in the business of turning around what is bad and making it turn out for the good he loves doing that that's his speciality so remember for example what joseph said you know at the end of genesis joseph sold into slavery by his brothers became the administrator of egypt eventually showed grace to his brothers you know the story at the end of all this when he's explaining this he said this genesis 50 verse 20 you intended to harm me but god intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done the saving of many lives god turns around what is evil what satan intends and what humans intend for evil god turns it around for the good the same thing we read for example in acts chapter 2 peter's great pentecost sermon when he's talking about the execution of jesus which

if we read the narratives we see satan brought about through judas and other things and the pharisees satan brought about the death of jesus and yet what does peter say about it he says this man was handed over to you by god's deliberate plan and foreknowledge and you with the help of wicked men put him to death by nailing him on the cross so satan's plan was to kill jesus but god used that evil it was all part of his plan to achieve the greatest rescue in history by saving his people from their sins because god is in the business of turning around what is intended for evil into good it's what he loves to do especially in the lives of his children and the sufferings and the temptations that satan puts in the lives of god's people to cause them to try fall away god turns those around to actually achieve the opposite and he uses them as the very things that are going to keep us clinging to god he doesn't actually just uh you know keep us holding on to him despite those things but he keeps us holding on to him because of those trials so to illustrate um you probably know if you know

me that i was big into sailing back in the day i wish i could still be but there's no sea in plumstead so it's a bit difficult um but i was once you might not know this about me i was once knocked overboard out at sea on a yacht um there was a half drunk skipper and he wasn't watching where the wind was and i was working on the foredeck and the boom you know the part at the bottom of the mainsail swung around with the full force of the wind and knocked me and i snapped through two safety rails into the sea but fortunately at the time i was there i was working on the kicking strap which is a rope below the boom and i was holding on to this thing and as i was knocked over i just clung on to i didn't even think i just carried on clinging on to this thing and because i was holding on to this thing i was basically dragged along the side of the boat in the sea and pulled back up onto the boat by the rest of the crew who actually were aware of what was going on um but it turned out that the very thing that tried to eject me from the boat was the thing that kept me clinging to it and in a similar way satan wants us to fall away but god uses the very things he tries to push us away with to keep us holding on and to keep us persevering in the faith because god is far smarter than satan god uses the instruments that satan intends for evil and turns them around for our good for our perseverance but how how does he do that that's what we want to know how does god actually use suffering to keep us clinging on to him and to uh to to use ultimately for our good will paul goes on to tell us he mentions at least two ways that god uses his suffering in his life for his good but i think paul is wanting to outline a general principle i don't think he's only talking about his suffering he's wanting to outline a general principle for all christian suffering that we go through all christian trial because he doesn't actually specify what his suffering is and i think the reason he doesn't specify is because he wants us to realize these are general truths for christian suffering and so the the first way that god uses his suffering for his good is and our suffering for our good as christians is that suffering teaches us that we don't need to be strong that's the first lesson he outlines here suffering teaches us that we don't need to be strong so paul prayed that god would take away his suffering his sickness or whatever it was and he says he prayed three times you might think that's you know is that all just three times now he may be referring to the jewish tradition of praying three times a day in which case paul probably prayed more than three times but or he just prayed on three [20 : 11] like intense occasions for a long period of time each but whatever it was the point is he prayed repeatedly for this thing and god despite that repeated prayer god said no but god didn't only say no to paul he also said why he said no you see because god doesn't want his children to suffer god and know that god doesn't you know he doesn't wish suffering upon his children which means he doesn't allow suffering for no reason if he's sovereign and he allows suffering into the life of his children it's for a reason now he may he may not tell us that reason directly but he did tell paul and through that he is actually telling us the main reasons in general that he allows suffering in our lives and so if we understand what paul is saying here we won't need necessarily to ask god every time why oh lord when he sends suffering in our life because he'll just say we'll go to 2 corinthians 12 i've told you why and so let's see god's response to paul verse 8 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 now as i said no parent wants their child to suffer but if you're a parent you'll know sometimes you will allow your child to be temporarily hurt for a greater good right and god does the same and the greater good for which he allows suffering in the lives of his children is firstly to teach us that his grace is actually enough for us to teach us that we don't need more than he gives us he it's the one of the best things for us to be convinced of that in our lives but it doesn't happen automatically god wants to teach us we don't need more than he gives us every day we don't need more money than the money he gives us we don't need more health than the health he allows us to have we don't need more safety or status than the safety or the status or the position or the influence that he allows us to have in life you know people do want all these things they want to be strong and get these things for themselves they want to deserve these things one of the drives of life is to deserve more money and more health and more safety and more status but god says my children don't need these things they don't need to be strong in themselves because i give my children what they don't deserve my children don't need to deserve these things because i give them grace that's what grace is it's undeserved favor and if we are in god's covenant if jesus is our king and we are his covenant people we are members of his of of israel true israel then we are covered by his grace god covers his people with his grace like an umbrella and if we are covered by his grace that is all we ever need and the reason that's all we ever need is because of what jesus did on the cross you know as i said earlier we feel inadequate because we fail at things in life we fail to be who we should be that's why we feel inadequate that was one of the lessons that peter

needed to learn remember when peter denied jesus three times after saying that he never would that had to happen and it was recorded for us because before peter experienced god's grace he needed to fail to be the disciple he thought he could be to make the point of what grace is the whole point of the cross was to cover over our failures to wipe away our failures just like it was for peter he's an example of all of us really we we want to be this kind of disciple we fail to be this kind of disciple

and that's why we need to keep coming back to the cross because it wipes away our failures our ultimate failure in fact you know what your ultimate failure is your ultimate failure is not the time you missed that easy shot in that important match your ultimate failure is not your broken marriage your ultimate failure is not your failed final exam or your retrenchment from your job no you know what your ultimate failure is it's failing to love your god with all your heart soul mind and strength that is your ultimate failure failure failure to be holy and to live the life that god made you to live but jesus by his blood on the cross washed that failure clean away for those who are his because he took all of that failure on himself at the cross and by his perfect obedience his perfection of loving his father with with all his heart soul mind and strength because of that and because he swapped places with us we his people are counted righteous so that righteousness is counted as ours our king's obedience counts as ours if we are his people and that is god's grace and let me assure you today that is the only thing you ever need that grace on the cross you don't need to be strong if god has already done everything necessary to save you and preserve you and bring you to the life and land that he promised in eternity you don't need anything else you don't need anything more that god is than god has already done for you and he continues to do for you his people in interceding for them every day we learned on thursday at ascension day when uh we were reminded that one of the things god is jesus is doing from his throne right now is interceding for his people his subjects and giving them the grace they need through his spirit for each and every day you don't need anything more than that don't think you do god wants you to realize that that you don't need anything more than he gives you you don't have to be strong when you have his grace but you know what because of our pride because of our instinct to uh to self-reliance we need suffering and difficulty in our life before we actually realize that before we realize that vital lesson and that is the first reason god says here that he he sends allows suffering in our lives to help us to see that his grace is sufficient we do not know that until we have no choice but to rely on it that's the first reason the second reason we need suffering is because it's through our suffering that we really experience god's power that's what he says here so god wants you to experience his power in your life but none of us can actually experience god's power without first being weak ourselves and really knowing our weakness that's what god means by verse 9 my power is made perfect in weakness now that word made perfect in the original literally means it comes to completion it is fully realized and so he's saying his power is only fully realized by us in our lives when we are weak you know that rope that i held on to for dear life as i was dangling in the ocean after being knocked overboard i only fully appreciated the strength of that rope when it was holding me up from being eaten by great white sharks and i couldn't hold myself up and let me tell you from that moment on every time i was working on the foredeck i stuck close to that rope we only realize how powerfully god works in our lives to sustain us and provide for us when we can't do

those things for ourselves you know if you ever want to know the power of god you first need to know how weak you really are and that's why paul says in verse 7 look at that again in order to keep me from becoming conceited i was given a thorn in my flesh paul's conceit paul paul the risk of paul thinking highly of himself his pride was the danger was a danger that god wanted to protect him from and so god sent the thorn in his flesh to protect him from the danger of pride and the reason it was a danger for paul it was because if he was proud of himself he would not have been able to experience the real power of god that he needed to enable him to be such an effective minister of the gospel he needed that suffering to make him realize his weakness so that the power of god could work through him so that he could be effective so his pride and his strength was actually a danger to his mission because his mission was to engage in spiritual warfare but that's your and my mission as well he says when he writes to the ephesians at the end he says we're all called to that battle we're all called to engage in spiritual warfare but you know what we can't do that in our own strength with our own weapons you know have you ever heard the phrase bringing a knife to a gunfight a knife will make no difference if your enemies are all armed with superior weapons well in the war that we are engaged in as the church on earth if we try to fight that war with our own skills

and our own clever techniques and our own growth models our enemies you know what they'll do they'll laugh we're bringing a knife to a gunfight because their weapons are far more powerful than our skills and our techniques their weapons are supernatural but you know what those enemies and all their power and their weapons fade away in comparison to god's power those enemies shudder and flee when they're faced with god's power and god wants to exercise his power through his people his church on earth but to do that he needs to first train us to stop relying on our own by giving us suffering suffering is the school to train us to use heavenly weapons of war and it makes us effective soldiers of christ it's the military training academy for spiritual warfare suffering is the world is preaching to us every day to pursue strength to pursue a strong life giving us techniques to be relationally strong selling us diets to be physically strong our magazines are full of strong looking people on the front cover that the world is telling us we must emulate even much of the preaching from pulpits in churches is telling us how to be spiritually strong in our own strength while all the while that is going on and we are hearing voices every single day saying be strong be strong all the while god is working to make us increasingly more aware of our weaknesses so that we can learn to rely on his strength and in that become truly strong and effective for his kingdom and that's why paul ends this passage by saying this is his conclusion have a look from verse 9 therefore i will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses so that christ's power may rest on me 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 that is the christian view of suffering right there highlighted underline it stick it on your fridge god in his wisdom loves to turn the bad into good and that's why for a christian our weaknesses are actually our strengths and so pray that god would help you to have the view that paul had about his weaknesses here to view your weaknesses as gifts that god is giving you to enable you to experience his grace and his strength like you never otherwise would have and may god be glorified as you do that amen let's pray lord we thank you for the apostle paul and how much you have revealed through him to us and the other apostles we thank you lord for giving him experiences that we'll probably never have in this life but all to enable him to be an effective minister of the truth to us and we pray lord that you would help us to take on board what we've read today in 2 corinthians help us to have the same attitude towards our sufferings and our weaknesses and our trials that paul had it seems such an impossible attitude to have to delight in our weaknesses but we do pray lord that you would help us to have a heavenly view of the things that you allow us to suffer help us to realize that you are causing your grace and power to work in us in those times more than any other times and help us to trust you in those times and to experience your power and to be a witness of your grace to those around us we pray this in Jesus name amen