

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, March 27, 2011**

SUFFICIENT GRACE

2 Corinthians 12:7-10

At the beginning of his best-selling book *The Road Less Traveled*, M. Scott Peck famously wrote: “Life is difficult.” Amen? That is intuitively obvious to the most casual observer, isn’t it? Life in this fallen, sin-poisoned world is difficult, and no one is immune. No one is exempt. In one way or another, and often in multiple ways at the same time, all of us are confronted by the unavoidable fact that life is hard. Pain and brokenness are part of our common human experience.

It certainly has been a part of my life. At the risk of boring you to pieces, I want to tell you a bit of my story this morning, because it bears witness to the truth of what the Lord said to Paul in verse 9 of our Scripture text today: His grace really is sufficient. I stand here today as a witness that God’s grace has always been, is now, and, I believe with my whole heart, will always be enough for me.

Like Paul, I have a “thorn in the flesh” (12:7). Paul doesn’t tell us what his thorn in the flesh was. Some people think it was an eye disease or malaria fever. Some have suggested that Paul had recurring epileptic seizures. Some think it might have been leprosy or depression or even migraine headaches. We don’t know. And that’s okay. What we do know is that, at first, Paul viewed this thorn in the flesh as a handicap, a hindrance sent from Satan to discourage him and to destroy his ministry (if Satan were able). He pleaded with the Lord to remove the thorn from his life. Three times, he says, he begged God to take it away. As is always the case when His people call to Him in prayer, God heard Paul’s pleading and answered his prayer – but not in the way Paul hoped. Paul didn’t get the answer he wanted. In His sovereign wisdom and grace, God said “No” to Paul’s request to remove the thorn, but instead gave the promise of His grace to sustain Paul in the midst of his pain – grace to persevere, grace to endure, grace to give him strength for life and power for ministry in spite of his weakness, in spite of his handicap, in spite of this thorn in the flesh. Not only did God promise to give Paul this grace to sustain him and give him strength, He told Paul that His grace *is* and *would always be* sufficient for him (12:7-10). In any and every circumstance in his life.

What God promised, Paul experienced. It was true in Paul’s life. It has been true in mine, too. His grace is sufficient. It has been sufficient for me. And I hope none of you will leave here today without knowing in your head and believing in your heart that His grace is and will always be sufficient for you.

Most of you know what my thorn in the flesh is. I have suffered from chronic daily headaches for the last 12 years or so. I wake up in the morning with a headache. I go to bed at night with a headache. I have a headache all day long. Every day. Sometimes it is more intense, sometimes it is more muted, but it is always there. To paraphrase myself, there is never a time when I don’t have a headache. And sometimes, it really gets me down.

When I met with the Deacons a few weeks ago, I was feeling particularly discouraged about my headaches in spite of all the different things I've tried in search of relief. When I shared my discouragement with the Deacons, do you know what they did? First, they asked if they could pray for me. I will never say "No" to that! Then they asked if it was okay to lay hands on me as they prayed. Which they proceeded to do. They all gathered around me and several of them prayed aloud, asking the Lord to heal me and set me free from these headaches which have been my constant companion for so many years. I have not been healed yet. The headaches are still with me. But I was blessed beyond words by the ministry of the Deacons to me that day. It warmed my heart. It encouraged my spirit. I felt greatly loved. I praise God for this gift of His love and grace. And I look forward to being healed, whether it is in this life or in heaven.

I have other issues, too, as many of you know well. If you have heard all of this before, I ask your forbearance. For some of you, this may be new. An MRI of my brain done back in November 2007 showed that I had a brain tumor known as an acoustic neuroma (also called a vestibular schwannoma), growing on the 8th cranial nerve going from the inner ear to the brain. This kind of tumor is usually benign (not cancerous), but it is still not a good thing. Typically it affects a person's hearing and sense of balance, and may also affect the facial nerve, resulting in a partial paralysis on one side of the face. In my case, the facial nerve was not impacted, but my hearing in my left ear was, and I was beginning to have occasional moments of dizziness and loss of balance.

After Mary Sue and I explored the options and prayed for the Lord's direction, I had surgery to remove the tumor at Johns Hopkins University Hospital in Baltimore in February 2008. The surgery went fine, but I ended up losing the hearing in my left ear completely. To this day, I have no hearing in my left ear. It is another thorn in the flesh that creates its own kind of challenges. I wear a hearing device in my left ear (called TransEar) that takes in sound from my non-hearing side and conducts it through bone to enable me to hear it in my right ear (my good ear). It is not perfect, but it helps me to hear better and enables me to hear some things I would otherwise miss completely.

My recovery from the brain surgery was much more difficult than I ever dreamed it would be. And it was much harder on my family than any of them ever expected. For weeks I had monster headaches – a new, different kind of headache resulting from the surgery. I had no energy. I couldn't walk more than two or three steps on my own without losing my balance, so I had to have someone to hold onto me whenever I was on my feet.

Then, a month after surgery, on April 1 (how fitting is this?), life got more difficult. By this time, I was stable enough to make it from bed to the bathroom on my own. But sometime during the night (I have no memory of it), on my way to the bathroom, I had a seizure, fell and hit my head, suffering what is called a traumatic brain injury (TBI), with bleeding in two lobes of my brain. I spent the next 17 days back in the hospital, first in the ICU at Fairfax Hospital and then back to Johns Hopkins, so that my surgeon could oversee my care.

After that, I had to go through a few months of rehab. The hardest thing was that I had to pretty much learn to walk again because of the effect of the surgery on my balance nerve.

Still today, there are moments when I zig in one direction or zag in another without intending to, and I occasionally need something to hold onto, or I may lose my balance. It will probably be this way as long as I live. My memory has been affected, too. Since the brain injury, I have had trouble at times remembering things I know I know, or coming up with the word(s) I want to use at a particular time.

I have experienced a lot of difficult moments in the last three years. My whole family has experienced a lot of difficult moments as a result – Mary Sue, especially, as she has walked this road with me, loved me with an extraordinary love, and modeled for me the meaning of grace. Through it all, I have experienced – I should say, we have experienced – the sufficiency of God’s grace. We know that God has been with us through it all. We have been carried along on the wings of grace. The Lord has brought us this far by His grace. Even in the hard places, perhaps especially in the hard places, we have found that His grace is sufficient for us.

I also know that God may not always give us what we ask for in prayer. He did not give Paul the answer Paul desired. He did not remove the thorn from Paul’s life. He has not chosen – yet – to take away the thorn of my headaches, or to remove the handicap of my single-sided deafness. Perhaps you have prayed for some thorn in your life, or in the life of someone you love, to be removed. Perhaps you have prayed fervently for healing, and it has not come – just as it has not come in my life, as much as I desire to be headache-free. I think we all need to learn and embrace what Paul learned through his experience.

He learned, first of all, that his thorn in the flesh came from God, who is sovereign over all things. Yes, Paul referred to the thorn as “a messenger of Satan,” because Satan, ever the opportunist, tried his best (or maybe we should say, his worst) to use this affliction for evil purposes in Paul’s life. Satan tried to use it to get Paul down, to discourage him, to hinder and even bring down his ministry, to cause him to lose heart and say, “What’s the use?” That was Satan’s purpose. But Paul came to see that God Himself was behind this thorn in the flesh, and God’s agenda was different than Satan’s.

What was God’s purpose? It was to keep Paul from becoming conceited as a result of the spiritual experiences (visions and revelations) he described in the opening verses of 2 Corinthians 12. It was to puncture Paul’s pride (R. T. Kendall), to give his pride a knock-out blow (F. F. Bruce). It was to keep Paul from getting a swelled head, and thinking of himself more highly than he ought – the very thing Paul himself warns against in Romans 12:3.

Pride is a danger to every one of us. Spiritual pride is especially deadly. You may be tempted, for example, to be proud of how spiritual you are. Your pride may prompt you to be critical of people who aren’t as spiritual or as committed, as generous, or even as “busy” as you are doing church work. Pride is opposed to grace. And grace is opposed to pride. The Bible says: “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (Proverbs 3:34; James 4:6; 1 Peter 5:5).

Paul recognized that God had a beneficial purpose in giving him the thorn. It was meant for his sanctification. It was part of God’s refining process in his life. It was given to show Paul

these two things conclusively: first, that he was not self-sufficient, and second, his need for grace. Grace, as Jerry Bridges says, is opposed not only to the pride of self-righteousness, but also to the pride of self-sufficiency. Before Paul could learn the sufficiency of God's grace, he had to learn the insufficiency of Paul. Before I could learn the sufficiency of God's grace, I had to learn the insufficiency of Neil. There is no question that God used Paul's thorn to teach him this truth. And there is no doubt that God has used my thorn(s) in the flesh to teach me this lesson.

What else did Paul learn? He learned that it was precisely his weaknesses and limitations – including his thorn in the flesh – that God would use as the stage on which to demonstrate the greatness of His power and the sufficiency of His grace. Paul had written previously, in 1 Corinthians 1, about the way God works, choosing to use the foolish things of the world instead of the wise, the weak instead of the strong, the lowly things and the despised and those to whom nobody pays attention instead of all the things the world tends to think are so great (1:27-29). So it should not be a surprise to any of us that God chooses to use suffering and pain and adversity and loss in our lives to fit us for more fruitful service, and through which to reveal His glory and grace.

I can give you at least four reasons why I think God gave me a thorn in my flesh, and why, perhaps, He has chosen not to take it away – yet:

- 1.) To make me more aware of my mortality, and to increase my longing for heaven. As much as I love life, there is hardly a day that goes by in which the prospect of a new body – and a new head – doesn't excite me. It is something I'm looking forward to. In *God's* time.
- 2.) As with Paul, to keep me from the pride (and foolishness) of thinking I am self-sufficient, or thinking that God really is blessed to have me (you know, someone as handsome and eloquent and wise and charismatic and spiritually mature ☺) serving Him. It is a constant, daily reminder not only of my mortality but also of my innate inadequacy apart from His power and grace. It helps me to remember I'm not such hot stuff.
- 3.) To teach me about grace itself, and to increase my appreciation of it. Wow! I feel like I have learned so much about grace in the past three years or so, because I have experienced it in so many way. Not that I did not already have a biblically orthodox theological understanding of grace, and the doctrine of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone; I did (and do). But through the thorns and interruptions I have experienced, I have received grace upon grace, grace heaped on grace, one grace after another. The grace I've received from God is just amazing. I will rejoice in it and sing of it for eternity. This church has extended great grace to me. Many of you have shown me grace in personal ways, through acts or expressions of kindness and love and patience. All the members of my family – Mary Sue, Erin, Lindsay and Nate – have been incredibly patient and gracious in dealing with my health “stuff” and the ways it has impacted our family. Mary Sue, more than anyone, has taught me about grace, because she incarnated it – she was the embodiment of grace to me during the times when life was most difficult, and she still is even now as we live with daily reminders of my limitations. She has consistently modeled the kind of grace that comes free of charge to people who don't deserve it. I don't deserve the kindness and grace she has

shown to me. And I never will. She has helped me to understand the grace of God in a deeper way than ever before. (Mary Sue would not be comfortable having me say these things about her, but she is not here today. She is in Pittsburgh this weekend visiting family. If she *were* here, she would take my words of praise about her and offer them up to the Lord as a bouquet of praise and honor to Him.)

4.) To make me a better pastor. To give me greater empathy for those who experience suffering, loss, grief, adversity, or trials of any kind. I hope I have become a better pastor as a result of the thorns and the grace I have experienced. I hope I will become a better pastor as God continues to work graciously in my life.

There is at least one more thing Paul learned from his experience. He learned the sufficiency of God's grace, which is what we have been talking about all along. Is life difficult? Yes, but God is an ever-present help in trouble (Psalm 46:1) and His grace is sufficient. It is God's nature to be gracious and compassionate, slow to get angry and abounding in love (Psalm 145:8). Is suffering of one kind or another inevitable in this life? Yes, but God is faithful (1 Corinthians 1:9) and His grace is sufficient. Can God use vessels like us, with all our problems and handicaps, all our limitations and weakness, to serve His purposes? Yes, because His power is made perfect and is put on display in our weakness, and His grace is sufficient. His grace is not only enough, it is more than enough. He gives us grace upon grace. He gives us extravagant, lavish, prodigal grace.

I have referred to Philip Yancey's book *What's So Amazing About Grace?* several times in recent weeks. In another of his books, *The Jesus I Never Knew*, Yancey writes: "Grace is for the desperate, the needy, the broken, those who cannot make it on their own. Grace is for all of us." It is for all of us. And this grace, described by John Calvin as "the help of the Holy Spirit which comes to us from God's undeserved favor," is, and will always be, sufficient for you and me.

I feel like I could give you example after example, and tell you story after story about the sufficiency of God's grace. I'll tell you one story. It is about a young guy named Tim, full of vitality, full of energy, full of potential, who was climbing up the ladder of success in the business world about as quickly as anyone can, until one day he landed in the hospital and the doctors determined he had leukemia, which would eventually take his life after a three-year battle. Tim told a friend visiting him in the hospital that he had learned that "life is not like a VCR." (You have to understand, this was back in the 90s, before the letters DVD or DVR or TiVo were part of our vocabulary.) His friend asked him what he meant. Tim said: "It's not like a VCR. You can't fast forward through the bad parts." After a brief silence, he continued: "But I have learned that Jesus Christ is in every frame, and right now that's just enough."

Listen, dear friends: Whatever you and I go through in this life, whatever suffering or storms, whatever trials or troubles or thorns in the flesh, whatever disappointments or adversity, whatever grief or loss, whatever kind of difficulty we may encounter, Jesus Christ is in every frame. He is right there with us. He is right here. His grace is sufficient. I know it is sufficient for me. And I know it is sufficient for you.

Believe it. Embrace it. Appropriate His sufficient grace in your life. Lord let it be so in us, to the glory of Your name. Amen.