Sufficient Grace

## Understanding Grace

## By Steve Viars

**Bible Text:** 2 Corinthians 12

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### Faith Church

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Suppose I told you this morning that I was thinking about buying a boat? My guess is many would kind of roll your eyes at least internally, if that's possible, because many of us are familiar with that old saying: the 2 happiest days for any boat owner, the day he buys it and the day he sells it because often when you buy a boat, what you find is a lot of expenses, a lot of challenges for sure. So while you're trying to think of something nice to say, you don't want to completely burst my bubble. I explained to you that because I'm temporarily embarrassed for lack of funds, a phrase I used to use on my kids all the time, I actually am telling you this because I'd like you to go in 50-50 with me on the purchase. And I also hem and haw around for a few moments and add, "Well, technically it's not a boat. It's a ship. It's called the SS Gairsoppa." Now, at this point you're not even sure what to say so you kindly ask, "Well, do you have a picture of what you're wanting us to buy together?" And my response is, "Well, kind of. Kind of. Here's what it looked like in 1941." 1941. Now, you immediately want to invest in this nautical beauty, don't you? Because clearly we're going to find nothing but pleasure and reliability and great value from putting some money into buying this. But you think to ask, "Well, why are you showing me a picture that is so old?" And I hem and haw around a little bit more. I'm kind of good at that hemming and hawing thing and I hem and haw around a little bit more and I explain that, "Well, almost precisely 74 years ago to the day on February 17, 1941," think about your history, "February 17, 1941, our soon to be purchased asset had a little problem. A German U-boat attacked it 300 miles off the coast of Ireland and sunk it with a single torpedo."

Now, I can sense that you're about ready to walk away from the deal. You're getting buyers' remorse, aren't you? So I reassure you, "I actually have some newer pictures like this sonar image because I may have failed to mention it's about 3 miles underwater, our little ship that we're purchasing and I will agree with this, it is a bit rusty." I know that picture might be a little bit difficult to see but over there on the right, well, those are the stairs. It's probably best not to look too closely. I agree, it's past its prime.

What do you think of our investment? And what do you think that we're going to find if we buy that together? Another one of those 2 happiest days stories where you're really going to find nothing but trouble, nothing but heartache, nothing but unbelievable expense? Well, here's the lesson of the SS Gairsoppa: what appears to be of very little value to some may end up containing incredible abundance and sufficiency for those willing to patiently seek it. That's what an American company, the Odyssey Marine Exploration Company, believed and so they made a deal with the British government because the Gairsoppa was a British ship. The deal was that after expenses, they would split the proceeds of anything they found on that ship 80/20 with the company keeping 80% of the profit, the British government receiving 20% after expenses.

Do you know what they found on the Gairsoppa? About 2,800 bars of pure silver. About 110 tons of silver. This treasure was worth at least $58 million. You see, friends, what appears to be of little value to some, you were about to walk away from the deal, do you remember? What appears to be of very little value to some may end up containing incredible abundance, incredible sufficiency for those willing to patiently seek it. Now, if you think that's true of a shipwreck, that is infinitely truer of God's sufficient grace. With that in mind, I want to invite you to open your Bibles now to 2 Corinthians 12. That's on page 145 of the back section of the Bible under the chair in front of you.

I want to thank every person who served so well during our Biblical Counseling Training Conference. I know that many of you are a bit tired this morning and the reason you're tired is because you've just been serving and serving and serving our guests during the conference. And I received so many reports of how well the conference went and just the way our guests were served so well so I guess if you need a nap more than you need a sermon, just go right ahead because there is just something special, isn't there, about being tired but having it be a satisfied tired because you've just so joyfully been serving God. So thank you so much for just honoring the Lord in that way.

Our church's theme this year is "Finding Grace." Finding grace taken from this marvelous passage that I know a number of you are trying to commit to memory at this point in the year. Hebrews 4:14, "Therefore, since we have a great high priest," you believe that, don't you? We just sang about the cross. "We have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses," even if you're tired this morning, "but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. Therefore let us draw near," you've been doing that all through the week, "let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." Well, after kicking that theme off from that text from Hebrews 4, we spent the next 3 weeks in Romans 5 thinking about standing grace and abounding grace and reigning grace. Then last Sunday we switched to the book of 2 Corinthians and we studied this matter of spreading grace. Some of you have told me you're writing out these key verses on index cards, that your posting them all over your house. Some of you have said that you're actually carrying this growing stack of verses about grace with you and you're pulling them out at important times during your day and just reminding yourself of them. All of them are good ideas, for sure, because it really helps us to have an increasing understanding of the character and the value and the significance of this grace that we're seeking to find at God's throne together this year.

What we've already studied provides some marvelous passages to add to your cards. Obviously the theme in Hebrews 4 but you could also add to your card if you've not done this already, Romans 5:1-2. We studied this several weeks ago, "Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith," here it is, "into this grace in which we stand," you can stand in grace, "and we exult in hope of the glory of God." Or later in that same text, "The Law came in so that the transgression would increase; but where sin increased, grace abounded," that's the kind of grace we're talking about. Abundant, abounding grace. "All the more." Or the next verse in that text, "so that, as sin reigned in death, even so grace would reign." Grace can be the king in the sense that it is ruling, it is governing, it is controlling the way we think and the way we act. "So grace would reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." Or the key verse from last week, 2 Corinthians 4:15, "For all things are for your sakes," it's not about us, it's about potential ministry to others, Paul said, "For all things are for your sakes," why? "So that the grace which is spreading," that's what we want to see happen, "the grace which is spreading to more and more people may cause the giving of thanks to abound to the glory of God."

So if the question is: what is the potential treasure at the end of the search we've embarked on together? The answer is: standing grace and abounding grace and reigning grace and spreading grace and now this morning from this marvelous text in 2 Corinthians 12, God's sufficient grace. You couldn't have a series on the grace of God in a year without talking about Paul's thorn in the flesh. 2 Corinthians 12. Now, before we read the passage, let's just say a couple of words about the context of which we're studying. 2 Corinthians is a very unique book in the Bible and here is why: Paul is going to share more intimate, personal details about what he's facing here than in any other book of the Bible for sure. There's a reason for that. You see, after Paul had been used by God to plant the church in Corinth, he went on to minister to other places but then, regrettably, he received reports that some of the believers there were living in a way that was displeasing to God so he wrote them a least a couple of letters. We're not for sure how many but we know at least 2 of them: one we would call the book of 1 Corinthians and in 1 Corinthians, Paul confronted them about their sin and he encouraged them to repent and to begin growing in personal holiness and corporate unity and thankfully, many of the persons who received the book of 1 Corinthians, they did repent. They did obey. But unfortunately, some didn't and the people who didn't began stirring up trouble in the church. Can you imagine that? Especially questioning Paul's credentials and his apostleship. You see, sometimes that happens when a person doesn't really want to change. They believe they can discredit the messenger and then they won't have to follow the message and some of those attacks that Paul was receiving were harsh and personal and they hurt.

So in the book of 2 Corinthians, Paul opens himself up. That's what he does. Unlike any other book in the New Testament, he opens himself up to these people whom he loved so dearly. In fact, Homer Kent was the longtime president of Grace Seminary, just right up the road in Winona Lake, he wrote a commentary on 2 Corinthians. It is one of the standard commentaries in print today on this book and he entitled it, "Heart Opened Wide." Heart opened wide which was based on 2 Corinthians 6:11. "Our mouth," Paul says, "has spoken freely to you, O Corinthians, our heart is opened wide."

So we learned some things about Paul's struggles and Paul's challenges and the way that he personally processed all of that which we wouldn't learn anywhere else in the Scripture. This morning now, we want to read a short text, at least by our standards around here, I suppose, and find 5 steps that define the treasure of God's sufficient grace as the Apostle Paul opens himself up wide to us. 2 Corinthians 12, beginning in verse 7, "Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations," and I'm going to try to argue this morning that this text is very instructive in part for what it says and for what it doesn't say, how much time is spent on each aspect and even the order in which the subjects are discussed so please lock on to the flow of thought here. It's fascinating the way the text starts,

7 Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself [note that], there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me - to keep me from exalting myself! 8 Concerning this [this thorn in the flesh] I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me. 9 And He [the Lord Jesus] has said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness." [Then Paul responds] Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. 10 Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties [are you?], for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.

We're talking this morning about God's sufficient grace, from this text, 5 steps to finding the treasure of God's grace that is so very, very sufficient. How do you do that? And why should you do that? Well, first of all: value the humility. Uh-oh. Value the humility that suffering can bring. You see, what is it that frequently prevents us from even launching the expedition to find God's grace? What's one of the first things that could stop our annual theme in its tracks, friends? And one hard answer is: our own pride. You may remember what James said about that, God gives a greater grace. Therefore, it says, God is opposed to the proud, quoting the Old Testament in several places. "God is opposed to the proud but he gives grace to the humble." So God sometimes allows suffering to quickly bring us to the end of our pride and to motivate us to humbly turn and seek his grace, not always knowing, by the way, at the front end what we're going to find at the end of the expedition. That trial on the front end that you're facing right now might just look like a rust heap at the bottom of the ocean. You see, value the humility that suffering can bring.

Now, it's important to note the flow of thought in the text. Paul actually begins the discussion of his thorn in the flesh by talking about pride and humility before he talks about any of the details of what's actually occurring, did you notice that? And he actually says it twice in the same verse: "to keep me from exalting myself" and then he says a little bit more and then at the end of the verse he says "to keep me from exalting myself." It's sort of like bookends at the end of the report to be sure that we've got it. Value humility that suffering can bring, to keep me from exalting myself.

Now, you could summarize this point like this: Paul knew that God's blessing and bounty in his life, it had to be balanced or he could easily become proud and self-sufficient. So how had God been good to the Apostle Paul? Well, a lot of ways: his past upbringing and education. He spoke about that in detail in Philippians 3, Lord willing, a book we're going to study later on this year. Paul had excellent credentials. He had a solid family, received a first rate education. God had blessed him in all those ways. Certainly his marvelous conversion. If you've not reviewed that recently, you could do so in Acts 9. But the story of how God changed Paul from being Saul of Tarsus, the great persecutor of the church to being the Apostle Paul, the great planter of the church, that's a story for the ages. You could easily become proud or self-sufficient if that was your testimony. Then what he's especially focusing on here is his unique ministry. That's the point of this phrase "because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations." Well, what's that? Well, this is written before the Scriptures were complete and God had been revealing truth to Paul exclusively that had to be written down and then passed along to the early church.

Others, by the way, recognize that unique ministry that had been given exclusively to Paul. You may remember that the Apostle Peter said this about Paul, "And regard the patience of our Lord," this is 2 Peter 3:15, "and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation; just as also our beloved brother Paul." Did you know Peter talked about Paul? Here it is. "According to the wisdom given him, wrote to you, as also in all his letters, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand." Isn't that amazing? Peter found Paul's letters at times hard to understand. Now, listen to this, "which the untaught and unstable distort, as they do also," with the what? "With the rest of the Scriptures, to their own destruction." So follow that logically: Peter had no trouble elevating the writings of the Apostle Paul and placing them on par with the rest of the Scripture. Well, somebody had to be used in this way and God had chosen Paul for this task and Paul now realizes that could be a pretty heady assignment; that could very easily lead to pride. It could very easily lead to self-exaltation or self-sufficiency and Paul's testimony was, "to shield me from that." Do you want to be shielded from pride, by the way? "To shield me from that. To protect me from that. God blessed me with an opportunity to suffer and if that's what it takes to keep my pride in check, then it was a good thing." You might want to pause and think about all the ways that God has gifted you and blessed you and equipped you and the danger in all of that, friends, is to get full of ourselves and see no need to find God's grace. So the thorn in the flesh was given to keep pride in check and to motivate the launch of the expedition to find something better.

We could also say this is consistent with Peter's message as well. You remember what Peter said in this marvelous text, 1 Peter 5:6, "Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time." Well, Peter could certainly talk about the topic of pride, couldn't he? And how devastating that sin would be? By the way, we could all talk about it, huh? If we could talk about anything, we could talk about that. So the leaders in the early church knew we could get to the place of valuing suffering because of its potential to keep us humble and motivated to find grace. We know that by experience, don't we? Some of us were experts at raising children. We were so proud of how much we knew about raising children until, what? Until God gave us a few, huh? I hate to refer to them as little thorns in the flesh so I won't do that this morning but until God gave us a few and then we recognized how much grace we needed. That suffering was good because it drove you to the throne of grace. Others were experts at handling money. We kind of look down our noses at others who didn't handle it so well until we lost our job and the income was gone. Some really look down their noses at people who had messed up until they or one of their loved ones fell.

You see, many of us could enumerate all sorts of ways that God has blessed us and been good to us and even used us in some if not many ways. We could certainly talk about that as a local church, especially after this past week. Well, what do we need along with that to keep us from exalting ourselves personally and corporately? Dare I say it out loud? We need a measure of suffering. You see, value the humility. That's the point. Value the humility that suffering can bring.

Now, you might say, "Okay, maybe now that explains why the Lord is allowing a measure of suffering in my life. He's allowing a thorn in my flesh," or maybe a whole bunch of them. Well, here's something else we can learn from this text: don't waste time focusing on the wrong things. You see, finding the sufficiency of God's grace, if that's what you want to do, if you want to get to the ship, if you want to find the bars of pure silver, if you want to understand more about the sufficiency of God's grace, that requires the skill of developing a disciplined mind. Peter said it like this, "Therefore prepare your minds for action especially during a time of trial. Keep sober in spirit. Fix your hope completely on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ." And what we see in this text in 2 Corinthians 12 in part is Paul's discipline on what he did not focus on. Or dare I say what he didn't obsess about. Or what he did not endlessly discuss. Don't waste time focusing on the wrong things. For example, on the identity of the thorn.

Now, there are a few things we know about this thorn. We know, for example, that it was serious. How do we know that? Well, because the word for "thorn" literally means "stake." When you think "thorn in the flesh," don't think about that thing that pricks your finger when you're tending your rosebushes. We're not talking about a thorn like that. The word means "stake" on which somebody would be impaled. It was an instrument of torture. It's a serious issue.

We also know it was given by God. It's interesting to think about the grammar of this passage, "God gave this to me." We also know it was a messenger of Satan. Paul said as much. So there is some sort of Satanic involvement here and we also know that it tormented him. That's the verb that's used. Again, a serious issue. But what I want to point out to you, friends, is: all of that was given in an economy of words: bang, bang, bang and that's it. He talked about his potential pride first, then he told you about his thorn. Bam, bam, bam and that is it. What's amazing about this text in part is what we don't know. We don't know the identity of the thorn. What was Paul's thorn in the flesh? We have no idea. We have absolutely no idea. He doesn't say.

Now, there are all sorts of speculation. You understand many times the most interesting reading in the Bible for some is between the lines. I mean, there are all sorts of interesting speculation for sure but apparently Paul didn't thing that should be the focus of the discussion.

Now, let me just pause and ask you: are you that disciplined in your mind when it comes to a time of suffering? By the way, something else that might help us exegetically: this word "messenger of Satan," "messenger" is the Greek word "angelos" from which we obviously get the English word "angel" or "messenger." And normally when the word "angelos" is used in the Bible, it's not used to talk about a thing. It's used to talk about a being or a person which is why many would take the position that Paul's thorn in the flesh was not a physical ailment, many would believe it was actually another person who was dogging his ministry and trying to discredit him. You see, Paul doesn't give a specific description of the suffering the time of day. How different than many of us, huh? We can focus on the pain and we can talk about the suffering until we're blue in the face, especially if another human being is involved. "Let me tell you all the things she said," and, "Let me tell you all the things he did or didn't do." We can be professional thorn describers, right? We can be professional thorn obssessors, all the while wasting time and effort that could have been better spent launching the expedition to find something better.

So we don't know the specific identity of the thorn. We also, by the way, don't know the specific place of Satan in this process. Now, Paul is honest. Satan is involved. He calls his thorn in the flesh a messenger of Satan but then Satan is not given nor should he ever be given center stage. Do you realize this passage is a significant problem for the demons and deliverance crowd who think that when you're having some sort of a difficulty, you need to identify the demon that's involved and then you need to have some sort of power encounter. If there was ever a period of time, ever a place in biblical history where that should have and would have occurred, it would be right here because Paul even says, "it is a messenger of Satan" but then Satan barely gets a mention for the rest of the text and don't you know that honks him off and aren't you for honking him off every time you have the opportunity to do so?

Well, what's the bigger lesson here? The reason that some of us don't suffer well and therefore fail to discover the treasure of God's sufficient grace is because our focus is on the wrong place. You only have so much time. You only have so much energy. You can only think so many thoughts. You can only say so many words. You can only do so many deeds and the principle is: whenever you're suffering, you need to go into a careful expenditure of resources mode. Do you do that with a disciplined mind? During a time of suffering, going into a careful expenditure of resources mode? And one of the questions we all have to ask is: is it possible that one of our problems during times of suffering is that you're expending your limited resources on things that really shouldn't be a focus?

Now, something else we need to point out here. Don't try to respond like a stoic. I am not saying that and Paul was not doing that. You have to appreciate Paul's honesty here. He's really opening his heart wide. He implored the Lord. There is nothing casual about the way he prayed to God about this matter. He is begging. He was. He was entreating and I want to be sure that I've said this morning there is absolutely nothing wrong with you bringing your request before the Lord. So you say, "Well, is it wrong for me to ask God to remove the thorn?" Apparently not. Paul did that over and over and over. In fact, that's one of the blessings of having a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Peter said, "casting all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you." Our core text, "We don't have a high priest who can't sympathize with our weaknesses, one who has been tempted in all things, therefore, let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace." So there was nothing wrong with the Apostle Paul imploring the Lord.

He also implored the Lord repeatedly. If you're in a period of significant suffering right now and I assume that there will be many persons listening to this message today and you are in some way, shape or form. Maybe a few people know about it right now but if you have a thorn in the flesh or a series of thorns in the flesh, I want to encourage you to meditate on the Psalms in the Old Testament. And one of the principles that you'll see in the Psalms is that God actually invites us to come to him with our questions and with our concerns. I think to be honest with the Old Testament, you would have to say even with our respectful complaints. And also remember this: it's not like you get one coupon. Paul implored the Lord repeatedly and there is absolutely nothing in this text that would suggest that there was anything wrong with that. In fact, he implored the Lord repeatedly that it might leave him. We would not be honest with this passage if we did not acknowledge that. He implored the Lord 3 times that God would remove the thorn. And I want to be sure: nobody is suggesting that we should go through life with some goofy, plastic smile on our faces as if we like thorns. There is only one thing worse than a guy walking around school with a "kick me" sign taped to his back and that is if he's the one who put it there as if that's what Christianity is. Stoic sufferers are not being honest with themselves. That's not being authentic with their God. It's not going to have an effective ministry to anybody else.

There's nothing wrong with imploring the Lord but it didn't stop there, right? Not by a long shot. Here's the focus: let suffering teach you. Let suffering teach you about the sufficiency of God's grace. You see, God's message to the Apostle Paul and probably to many of us this morning, God's message to the Apostle Paul is: there's something better than having the thorn immediately removed. Do you believe that? That would have been a good time for an amen. Do you really believe that there might be something better in your life than for the thorn to be immediately removed? And what is that? It's coming to learn in a richer, fuller, more profound way about the sufficiency of God's grace. Jesus said to Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you." And the tense of that verb in verse 9 suggests that Jesus said that over and over and over. Every time that Paul needed to hear it, "My grace is sufficient for you."

I'll tell you, I've seen that happen over and over as a pastor. That very process working itself out, demonstrating the truth of the Scripture where people in our church family have been called upon to go through significant trials and we would have never voted on them. If we had an opportunity to decide as a church family whether that person would face that, we would have said no. Absolutely. That's why God has not entrusted sovereignty to us. In fact, we would have done everything we could have to prevent that from coming into the life of one of our brothers or one of our sisters. No question about that. But as that man or that woman and sometimes boy or girl, as that person suffers well, what was the outcome? A greater understanding, a greater appreciation for God's sufficient grace that can't be gained through any other means than the crucible of adversity.

Paul said earlier in this book, "God is able to make all grace abound to you." Do you want that? "God is able to make all grace abound to you so that always having all sufficiency in everything," wow I was talking to Andrew last night about what we were going to be talking about in church and he said, "Well, what does 'sufficient' mean?" I love his just openness about it. If he doesn't understand a word, he's going to ask, continuing to learn, well, there it is. "And God is able to make all grace abound to you so that always having all sufficiency in everything, you may have an abundance." Do you get the point? "For every good deed." Do you want that to be true in your life? And what if in order to gain a better perspective on the wonderful grace of God, you had to be given a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet you?

Do you know that one of the worst things a Christian can do is cut theology class. When our daughter Bethany went off to college, she amazed me when she reported back. "You know, it's just interesting, dad, how many kids don't go to class." And she wasn't criticizing them. That wasn't her point. It just surprised her. She assumed that if a person was going to go to college and they are paying for the classes or their mom or dad was paying for the classes, you'd go to class and it just amazed her how many kids didn't ever go to class. In fact, she told me one day that she and some of her friends had been studying hard for a test and they went to class, took the test and they're all relieved and heading over to the dining hall after having gone through that test and they actually walked by a girl who was in the class and that girl had cut class so many times. She said to them, "Hey, what did you guys do today?" They said, "We had an exam. You just missed the exam." Well, how many of us aren't in our places in theology class? We're so busy fussing about the thorn or talking about the thorn or maybe thinking about where Satan is involved or blah, blah, blah that we miss the opportunity to learn about God's sufficient grace.

Now, what's the other lesson? You learn about God's grace and you can also learn the supremacy of Christ's power. Paul said, "For God's power is perfected in our weakness." Here's the principle: you can either live by your own strength in your own power and that will get you to a certain place but not very far or you can do something we proud Americans don't like to do: you can acknowledge your weakness and you can tap into power that is not your own but is far more superior to anything you could conjure up by yourself. Friends, that is the problem with many of us. We'd rather figure it out on our own. We'd rather solve it our self. In fact, during a time when there's a thorn in the flesh, instead of drawing closer to God, we're actually running further away from him. We'd rather figure it out on our own. We'd rather solve it ourselves. We'd rather try to be independent even when our own resources are pretty meager and God wants us to know about his power.

Now, by the way, let's just push the pause button on that for a minute. Where does that start? Well, it begins by admitting that we don't have enough power to save ourselves, to earn our way to heaven. Paul had said this in Romans 5, "For when we were yet without strength," strength what in this text? Well, enough strength to get yourself to heaven. Enough strength to pay for your sin. Enough strength to earn enough righteousness on your own. "For when we were yet without strength." Again, I know we Americans don't like to acknowledge that we're ever there. "In due time, Christ died for the ungodly." You see, only men and women who are willing to admit that they aren't strong enough to earn their way to heaven will be willing to humbly come to Christ in repentance and faith. And if you're here this morning, you might be in a time of trial. You might be in a time of adversity where you feel like you really have a thorn in the flesh but you don't yet know Christ and the reason God put you in that position was to bring you to the end of your wisdom, to bring you to the end of your own strength, to cause you then to turn around, repent, and move back to him. Whatever you think is your own righteousness, you just throw that aside. Compared to the holiness of God, all of that would be like filthy rags. So you just empty your hands of anything that you think could earn righteousness on your own merit and then run, not walk, to the cross that we sang about earlier this morning and ask God for a gift of forgiveness that can only come through his Son's sufficient blood and only come through his sufficient grace. And if you've never made that decision, on this cold, Sunday morning, I would urge you, I would invite you to make that decision.

Then that continues throughout the Christian life of saying, "Lord, I know that I can't do this apart from you. I thank you for putting me in a position of vulnerability because I want to learn more of what your strength is like." Did you pray that this week? Did you pray that a lot of times this week? "Lord, I know I can't do this apart from you and thank you for this thorn. Thank you for putting me in a position of vulnerability because I want to learn more of what your strength is like." It's like Paul's prayer in Ephesians where he said, "I'm praying that God would grant you according to the riches of his glory to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in the inner man." Well, when does that frequently happen? During a time where you have a thorn in the flesh and you come to the end of yourself and you run to the throne of grace. Or later, "Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we could ask or think, according to the power that works within us." When? On a holiday? When everything is just going peachy? No, many times it's during a proper response to a thorn. "According to the power that works within us to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen."

You see, my question for you this morning would be: have you been present in theology class? When God wanted to teach you about his sufficient grace? When God wanted to teach you more about his marvelous power? You weren't cutting class, were you? In fact, some of you, when I said that, there was a girl who was cutting class, you said, "If that was my daughter, I'd..." You can finish that sentence on your own. Well, some of us are just like that, missing in our seat in theology class, failing to let suffering teach us about the grace and the power of God.

Well, what are the takeaways at the end of verses 9 and 10? Paul says, "Then act on the lessons you learned." What do I do with this? Well, "Delight in my weaknesses." That's what he says, "It's possible to delight in acknowledging my weakness in this particular situation." Why? What's the "so that," the hina clause? "So that the power of Christ may dwell on me." The word "dwell" in that verse, by the way, means "pitching a tent." The power of Christ pitching a tent on me. So Paul is saying, "I don't have to be afraid of my vulnerability. I can delight in such occurrences because it's then that the power of God pitches his tent on me." Then, cultivate contentment. I'm going to stop cussing the thorn. There it is. I'm going to stop whining about the thorn. "For Christ's sake, when I am weak then I am strong."

God's grace is sufficient, friends. We certainly found this to be true as a family. Many of you have asked how our trip to Mayo Clinic went with my wife Chris last week. We got back Friday night. I had some errands to run yesterday and ran into several church members. I've told this story now about 40 times. I do appreciate, seriously, I appreciate everyone's prayers and everyone's interest. I would be wrong, especially since I'm leaving town this afternoon, to not bring you up to speed with what we know. So let me do that for a minute. I realize that there are a number of people in our church who have or who are facing much more serious medical situations so we want to be sure that we're praying for people like the Schneider family and many others right now so don't let me talking about this give the impression that I don't care more about some of these other situations. Also, I just want to repeat something in case you weren't here last week: we did not go to Mayo because we were dissatisfied with the great medical care that we were already receiving. We went because Chris's condition was deteriorating more rapidly than we could schedule appointments using our traditional medical model. That was the issue.

Well, here's where we are right now. There are a number of test results that have not come in yet, that won't come in for the next couple of weeks. But in the words of our internist who kind of quarterbacks the case when you go to a place like Mayo, her words were, "We haven't found anything nasty yet." That's exactly what she said. "We haven't found anything that serious yet." So the good news is, at least at this point, we don't have any terribly bad news. One of our physicians said, "You have us stumped but concerned." It's a serious situation. They are just not exactly able to explain the source and so since we don't have a specific diagnosis, the plan is at least now to treat the symptoms and then see what happens and we have received some strategies for addressing these symptoms. I guess, there's 3 possibilities at this point. One is that the symptoms will improve or maybe even go away. That could happen. Or the symptoms will stay the same and that becomes the new normal. I'm not sure how much longer she could go with that as a normal but that is a possibility that they'll stay the same. Of course, the third option is that the symptoms will get worse. So that's where we are and at some point you have to decide are you going to draw a line in the number of tests you're going to receive and the number of interventions you're going to have and then just see what happens and that's where we are right now.

I also want to just thank folks for serving at the Biblical Counseling Training Conference. We received so many reports of how well things went last week. In fact, I'm thinking that next year the church is going to encourage me to take my vacation the second week of February. That just reinforces, isn't it interesting, in the sovereignty of God, you realize we put our preaching schedule together last year and isn't it interesting in the sovereignty of God, last Sunday we would have studied that great text last week about spreading grace from 2 Corinthians 4 which emphasized the issue isn't the identity of the vessel, the pot. The issue is the value of the treasure inside the vessel and we saw that played out in so many ways last week so thank you for serving and serving so well. I know that God was honored through that.

I also just want to say that I'm very thankful for the way our children served us. You know, you don't raise your kids to serve you. You raise your kids to love God. You raise your kids to leave and live independently but it was so delightful that on their own, our children chose to serve us and so Karis and Austen stayed here with Andrew so he did not have to make that trip. That was an incredible blessing. Our daughter Bethany met us there and was there with us the entire time and it's so helpful just to have another set of ears and another set of eyes in a situation like that where there is so much information that you're trying to process. Robin and Liam, such a great, great comfort to us.

I would encourage you to pray for our family. I know you will. That's why yesterday the task list took so much longer yesterday because so many people are concerned. Thank you for loving us in that way and so continue to pray for us and pray for everybody in our church family as we enjoy this process of learning more about God's sufficient grace.

I guess I would summarize all of this with this: don't be afraid of that rusty ship 3 miles down on the ocean floor. You might just find a treasure. You might just find a treasure that is abundantly sufficient.

Let's stand together for prayer, shall we?

*Father in heaven, you are so good and you're even good in allowing thorns to help us overcome our proud, stubborn independence. So Lord, I pray that as we would think about our thorns, if there has been some lack of discipline in our response, I pray that we would shore that up. For the person who has not yet trusted Christ, I pray that they would let their thorn lead them to the cross, the most profound thorn ever. And Lord, I pray for those of us who know you. I pray that we would have disciplined minds to the end that we would learn more about how your grace is sufficient and your power is perfected in our weakness. We pray this in Christ's name. Amen.*