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“God’s grace is sufficient” By Forbes T Maupa ©

2 Corinthians 12 vs. 2-10: Paul’s boasting and humility

For the most part of my talk today, I will be making reference to a passage of scripture that is widely quoted and used by Christians. Songs of praise and worship have been written about/on/around the verse. It might be that some of us here hold dear to the words that I am putting under the microscope today and so it would be interesting to speak into “your area of confidence”. But I am also interested in generating conversations around widely held views on what certain passages of scripture mean. You may begin this conversation with your friends, bible study group or even with yourself!

“Wherefore, so that I should not get above myself, I was given a thorn in the flesh, a messenger from Satan to batter me and prevent me from getting above myself. About this, I have three times pleaded with the Lord that it might leave me, but he has answered me, ‘My grace is enough for you: for power is at full stretch in weakness...’”¹

The statements above need to be read in context of the preceding verses and actually from chapter 10 vs 1ff. Paul seemed to have met up with individuals (most likely prominent apostles and fellow preachers) who were challenging his calling and his authenticity. It can be argued that these individuals were flaunting their CVs around as Paul argued;

“We are not venturing to rank ourselves, or even to compare ourselves with certain people who provide their own commendations. By measuring themselves and comparing themselves to themselves, they only show their folly.”²

¹ 2 Corinthians 12 vs. 7-9 NJB

² 2 Corinthians 10 vs. 12 NJB

Paul goes on to give explain why he considers himself humble but from chapter 11 vs 21b he begins to count out his own credentials including his ancestry and what he has endured as an apostle. He takes it one gear up when he refers to himself in second person in the verses we read today from chapter 12 vs. 1. He says

“I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago...was caught up into the third heaven...was caught up into Paradise and heard words said that cannot and may not be spoken by any human being”³

It is after saying these dramatic statements that Paul then mentions the proverbial “thorn in the flesh that God will not remove”. It can be argued therefore that for Paul at least, the thorn in the flesh had to do with toning down his pride which might have come as a result of these “heavenly experiences” he mentioned. What the actual thorn in the flesh might have been for Paul cannot be ascertained and I will not have that discussion here today. I am interested in exploring the contexts (the way we apply the verse is determined by how we understand it) where we use the statement **“God’s grace is sufficient for you/me/us”**. When do we use it and why? Oftentimes Christians use these words in the face of challenges that seem insurmountable. When we are faced with disease, pain and disappointed the easiest statement to make or that others make is “God’s grace is sufficient for you”. I do not for a moment doubt the “sufficiency” of God but I want to argue that the statement as quoted from Paul is used to justify or even explain away that which we do not understand. I would even further argue that it can be a statement of giving up and accepting the status quo. For Paul, it can be deduced that the “thorn in the flesh” was meant to keep him human and humble him from the credentials he claimed. When we quote it, what are we saying? Is it a failure to believe that things can be better? Is it giving up because we become aware that we cannot change whatever we are going through? Is it an attempt to justify unanswered prayers or what God has failed or decided not to do? Maybe we should not be using “grace is sufficient” as our run to statement when we are in a situation where we don’t know how to get out of. It should NOT be a go to statement for ministers and those offering words

³ 2 Corinthians 12 vs. 2-4 NJB

of encouragement to the sick/bereaved/down trodden when they run out of words. It is not a feel good statement. Someone in an abusive relationship cannot be comforted by these words, women and children being raped, people being robbed and killed. To simply say their experiences are a “thorn in the flesh” and there “grace is sufficient for them” is to suggest that their pain is God given and I am refuting that!

I would want to request that we shrug off statements that comfort us and stop us from pushing forward. May the grace of God be sufficient not for you to remain in an oppressive and painful situation but rather to step out of it. Paul seemed sure that whatever his thorn in the flesh was, it was God given but are so sure that the situations we justify with the same statement are actually God given? Just for today, let’s tell ourselves that we are not going to have business as usual and accept pain or failure in the guise of thorn in the flesh and the rhetoric of God’s grace is sufficient!