

“His grace IS sufficient” (2 Cor 12:1-10)

I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven – whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. And I know that this man was caught up into paradise – whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows – and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter.

On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses – though if I should wish to boast, I would not be a fool, for I would be speaking the truth; but I refrain from it, so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me.

So, to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited.

Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

Today we have a unique opportunity. We can hear from Paul the apostle as he shares with us very personal details of his life. Very personal emotions. Something that people tend to keep to themselves. Something that Paul was keeping to himself.

Until the situation in Corinth pressed him to share these things in writing with Corinthians, about whose salvation Paul was deeply concerned. He writes that he feels divine jealousy towards the Corinthians.

What is that? It means that Paul who genuinely loved the Corinthians, who was their father in faith, who had brought them to Jesus, who had worked and prayed for their salvation days and nights, now with bleeding heart was witnessing how false teachers were deceiving his children in faith and leading them away from Christ and turning them against Paul.

This is what the divine jealousy means, this is, why God says that He is a jealous God. For He loves every one of His children, each one of you, and He is jealous, passionately jealous when false teachers or idols enslave us, rob us of His love and blessings, lead us away from Him and turn us against Him.

Unfortunately, many of us probably can relate to this divine jealousy theme from our own experiences in our direct or extended families. That is a heartbreaking experience. When your child, whom you love with your whole heart, whom you have tried to bring to Jesus with your example and your prayers, doing as much as you could, is deceived and seduced and led away

from Jesus. It hurts. It makes us jealous. That is what Paul was experiencing. What Paul is trying to do in this letter, he is trying to show what following Jesus looks like. That, regardless of what our sinful heart desires, following Jesus doesn't lead to glory, honor or high status in this age, rather it leads to sufferings and rejection.

The Corinthians were open to the other teachings because there were just like us. They were attracted to all the things shiny and impressive, the things that this world is attracted to, the things that this world values highly.

When there came those false teachers who were so outspoken, who were so impressive in their performances, who preached and embodied prosperity and wellbeing, whose message resonated so well with what the Corinthians desired in their hearts, they were ready to forget what Paul had taught them.

We are not that different today. We desire honor from this world. The sad fact is, that even many Christians see following Christ not as living contrary to how this world lives, they simply hope that this God would help them to get ahead and higher in this world. And if they do well on their own, then why on earth they would still need Jesus!

We desire to be recognized, we desire to be accepted, we desire to be praised for all the good things that we do, and to be honored and liked by the society. And when the society doesn't do that, Christians may start doing it themselves, praising one another.

"Wow, we did such great things! Glory and praise be to ... us! Glory and praise be to ... me!" The Corinthians were too weak to resist these temptations. And too often we are too weak to resist them. You can speak for yourself, but I can confess that I thirst for this kind of glory and honor.

That people would see what wonderful things he has done. So that they would appreciate and realize what a wonderful person he is. The way of glory, the wide way, the wide gates... and as Jesus said, so many enter by it.

This is where Paul brings in his insights. We may not like them, but it is good for us to hear them. Because Paul isn't someone who can only give one perspective. Then people could write him off by saying that he just doesn't know what he says or says it out of envy.

No, Paul had everything that he could have wanted. Born in a wealthy family, Roman citizen, having received the best education, having wonderful career prospects, being in a way a star among his peers when it came to his religious zeal. He had it all, he would be a person whom others would envy and adore.

All of that belonged to his old life though, before Jesus spoke to him on the road to Damascus. Then later, when he looked back at all those things, so precious in the eyes of the world, he called them 'scubala', rubbish.

But then Paul speaks about his life as Christian. That was quite a life as well. What were his accomplishments? What would we consider accomplishments? We would probably highlight the fact that he traveled a lot and planted so many congregations. He wrote thirteen letters included in the New Testament.

Sounds impressive! What a resume! But this is not what Paul is boasting about. In fact, you will not find it anywhere in his writings where Paul reflects on what HE has accomplished, or how great things HE has experienced.

There were and there are Christians who boast of their spiritual experiences, as if they would make them more special than others. As if those experiences were their own accomplishments and now they, as high achievers, could look down to others.

Paul shares one of his experiences. But not to boast, but to illustrate that even the best among us, can't properly handle even something that is not our own achievement. Paul tells about his experience of being caught up to the third heaven, up into paradise, where he saw and heard things that cannot be even told, that man may not utter.

That's something! Apart of Enoch and Elijah we don't know of anyone who have had the same experience. Later also to John the apostle similar revelation will be given. Paul doesn't give us details, but one is clear.

What he saw, what he heard, what he experienced, allowed him to say that knowing what God has prepared for those who love Him, "he considers that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us." (Rom 8:18)

Are not worth even comparing... and Paul suffered a lot. More that we can imagine, more that we could endure. And these words are of great comfort to us. I would guess that most of us haven't been caught up into paradise, but even so we can learn from Paul, that what awaits us in the age to come, is more than we can even imagine.

However, Paul doesn't boast about his experience in paradise. He hadn't even told about it to others. Why? This was his reason. "So that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me." Could you say that?

Honestly, I couldn't. I want people to know all the great things I have done, especially if they don't know them yet. But Paul says the very opposite. "I don't want people to think more of me, that they can see or hear from me."

He doesn't want people to see him, he only desires people to see and hear Jesus. Paul is happy to be invisible, so that only others could hear and learn about Jesus. This is something we should all reflect on...

But there is one more reason, why Paul kept silent about his heavenly experiences. It is very strange, or we could say very sad one, but it makes sense.

Paul could boast about his experience, but he didn't, for then he would risk of becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of his revelations. Even more, to protect him from the conceit God gave him a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass him, to keep him from becoming conceited. Sounds strange, doesn't it? But what does it tell us?

Paul, we would consider him a saint. But even Paul couldn't handle the gifts of God. What was the risk? That he would take God's gifts and turn them into his own accomplishments, trying to elevate himself above others.

Isn't that what we all suffer from? If God has blessed us, how often we take it as a proof of our own goodness, or worthiness, or competency. "I did this. I acquired that. I achieved it, and so on." Our sinful nature does this all the time, it takes God's gifts and presents them as our own accomplishments. How sad...

We don't know what this thorn in the flesh for Paul was. But we know that it made him suffer a lot and that he sincerely wanted to be freed from it. He prayed the Lord three times. Paul the apostle prayed for it three times...

And what was the Lord's answer? No! My grace is sufficient for you! My grace is sufficient for you! Is this the answer that we are looking for when we pray? Is this what we expect to hear from the Lord when we pray?

My grace is sufficient for you! And how did Paul respond to this? With such humility that we all need to learn from him. He wrote: "I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong." All of this, for the sake of Christ... You will never hear Paul boasting about his own achievements.

You will never hear Paul boasting about how many churches he planted, or how much teaching he did, or how many people he brought to Jesus, or what a great missionary he was, or how important and great his work was. Never!

Why? Because Paul had learned to recognize that it was Jesus working through him. It is true for us as well. With everything good that comes from us. Paul didn't seek glory and honor for himself. He didn't look for praise and recognition from others.

He was happy to be weak, so that only the power of Christ would do its work. Paul just tried to be faithful to His Lord and Savior. Because Jesus had been faithful to Paul first, faithful to the death on the cross. Similarly, as He is faithful to each one of you.

And Paul simply tried to respond to God's grace by being faithful, regardless of the cost. And the cost was high for him. We may think, wow, he planted so

many congregation, he wrote great part of the New Testament, what a glorious achievement! Don't rush!

Even in his lifetime, many of his congregations turned against him. He didn't know what a blessing his letters will be for billions of Christians. What he experienced was weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities.

Just like the prophets. Just like John the Baptist. Just like the other apostles. Just like Jesus. But He had heard from His Master, from Jesus these words which gave him strength to endure whatever was thrown at him: "My grace is sufficient for you!" I pray that we all would cling to these words.

For this is Jesus' message to you: "My grace is sufficient for you!" This is, why Paul's begins all his letter by wishing us ... yes, grace to you and peace! This is, why we hear these words in every service ... "grace to you and peace...", for if we have God's grace, it is sufficient for us as well.

Having all the world and its glory means nothing, for it will pass away. Having God's grace means everything, for then you have Jesus, then you have the Father, then you have the Holy Spirit, then the Triune God is your God, and everything that is His, will be yours as well.

And remember what Paul said: "The sufferings of this present time are not worth even comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us."

Amen.