

## 2CH Sunday at 7.30

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Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

### Life's deepest secret

Presented by Steve Cooper

2 Corinthians 12:9

Good morning! Recently I chuckled at an article called 'Perks of reaching 50 or being over 60 and heading towards 70!' Here are some of the (so-called) perks: 'People call you at 9pm and ask: Did I wake you?' and 'Your supply of brain cells is finally down to manageable size!' and 'Your secrets are safe with your friends because they can't remember them either!'

Growing older is not always easy! As I laughed I remembered a phrase that has long intrigued me: 'growing old gracefully'. It seems to me that some people, as they grow older, become more humble, compassionate, and wiser. Others do not grow old gracefully at all: over time they react to their weaknesses and burdens by becoming more proud, bitter, and self-absorbed.

This morning let's examine a profound insight from the apostle Paul, recorded in the Bible. This insight has been aptly called 'Life's deepest secret'. I firmly believe that applying this insight will help us to 'grow old gracefully.'

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The apostle Paul in one of his letters shared a very personal experience that gave him deep insight into life. He records that Christ said to him: 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' (that's in 2 Cor 12:9). F.W. Boreham calls this insight 'life's deepest secret.'

This insight came to Paul as he was suffering from a heavy sorrow. He called it 'a thorn in my flesh' (v.7). We don't know exactly what his problem was, but it was probably some form of physical affliction. Scholars suggest Paul was perhaps burdened by poor eyesight, or malaria fever, or severe migraine headaches. Whatever it was, this 'thorn' was a painful trial for Paul, robbing him of joy and limiting his activities.

Paul's first response to this miserable situation was to turn to the Lord Jesus in prayer. He writes: 'Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me.' Paul's example reminds us that whatever disappointment or loss we face, we should turn to the Lord Jesus in humble prayer. He sympathises with our weaknesses and struggles (cf. Hebrews 2:18; 4:15-16). We can depend on him, and take everything, however small, into his presence.

As Paul prayed, he records that the living Christ spoke to him. The words were: 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Paul doesn't explain exactly how these words of Christ were conveyed to him. I think the Lord gave him this insight as he meditated on the central truths of the gospel, the death and resurrection of Jesus. When Jesus died on the cross for our sin, it was an expression of weakness and vulnerability. But now he has been raised the Lord Jesus is alive by the power of God. Paul's insight is that the follower of Jesus shares in the human weakness and pain of the crucified Christ, but at the same time experiences the grace and strength of the risen Lord (see 2 Cor 13:4).

Paul treasured those words about strength in his weakness. The key word is ‘grace’, which refers to the merciful kindness of the Lord Jesus. Paul came to a deep understanding of the grace that has been given to everyone who turns from their sin and trusts in Christ. That grace, mercy and kindness is always sufficient for us, even when, like Paul, we encounter painful trials and losses.

John Newton celebrated the riches of our Saviour’s love in his wonderful hymn ‘Amazing grace’. He wrote: ‘Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. Through many dangers, toils and snares, I have already come; tis grace has bought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home.’

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This morning we’re reflecting on life’s deepest secret. That secret is contained in these words of Christ to the apostle Paul: ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ This insight was given to Paul as he prayed for his painful suffering to be removed.

There is great significance in the words ‘My grace is sufficient **for you**.’ Paul was aware, of course, that the mercy and kindness of Christ is sufficient to rescue and deliver the sinful human race. But it was so difficult for Paul to believe that the grace of Christ can fortify him to endure his painful affliction. The insight that came to him opened his eyes to see that he already had all he needed. The reply was not ‘I *will* give you grace sufficient,’ but ‘My grace (which you have now) *is* sufficient for you.’ What Paul had already in his possession was enough for all that would come storming against him of disease, disappointment, loss and misery.

John Bunyan, who wrote the famous *Pilgrim’s Progress*, tells us that there was a period in his spiritual journey when his soul was like a pair of scales. He weighed up his sadnesses, his sins and his despair on the one side, and the grace of God on the other. For Bunyan, the scales were weighted heavily on the human weakness side, because the weight of his sorrows and struggles was so heavy. But the day came when Bunyan realised that the grace and power of Christ is sufficient for him. He wrote: ‘One day as I was in a meeting of God’s people, full of sadness and terror, for my fears again were strong upon me; these words did, with great power, suddenly break in upon me: ‘My grace is sufficient for you.’ Oh! I thought that every word was a mighty word to me.’ (from *Grace Abounding*, p.81)

Bunyan’s analogy of the scales is helpful. When we are facing our own grief, trials and weaknesses, we can consciously set on one side all our burdens, then set on the other side of the scales these two words: ‘My grace,’ and all these sufferings dwindle into nothingness and disappear. If only we could realize what mercy and kindness is ours when we trust in Christ, we would not be so troubled by our afflictions.

God has a purpose as we go through our weaknesses. He is shaping us to become more like Christ: more gentle, humble, patient and enduring. That’s what the words from Christ to Paul mean: ‘my power is made perfect in weakness.’ It’s like the formation of a pearl in an oyster. The process begins with an irritation caused to the oyster by sand or a bit of shell becoming trapped inside the oyster. To reduce the pain, the oyster secretes a substance that surrounds the particle. After several years, layers of this substance form a pearl around the particle, making it less painful. So for us: when we encounter pain and sorrow, we humbly turn to Christ in prayer and dependence, and he blesses us with his grace and power, shaping our character to reflect the beauty of Jesus Christ.

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Life has difficulties for all of us. We all encounter weakness and pain. How do we react to that weakness?

Paul gives us an insight from his own experience that helps us to grow through the sorrow, becoming deeper and wiser. When Paul was faced with a painful burden, he turned to the Lord Jesus in humble dependence and prayer. The Lord spoke to Paul these words: ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ This perspective given to Paul is life’s deepest secret. The mercy and kindness of Christ are such a rich treasure that this grace outweighs all the difficulties we face in life. God is at work in the sufferings of his children, shaping them to better reflect the character of Christ.

After learning his great insight, Paul came to a place of peace. His painful ‘thorn’ continued, but he was able now to accept the ongoing sorrow. He wrote: ‘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’s in 2 Cor 12:9-10) Here Paul is not passive and resigned to his suffering. Instead, he has come to a place of acceptance, which is active and obedient to the Lord, who in response to Paul’s prayer continues to sustain Paul with grace and strength. Paul can now see that his sufferings keep him humble, not self-conceited, and help Paul to be more effective in serving the Lord.

The insight from Paul we are considering this morning meant a great deal to Catherine Booth. Catherine was the wife of General William Booth, and together they founded the Salvation Army. Catherine Booth was one of the great Christian leaders of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. She had a strong character, with wisdom and practical compassion that won the respect and love of her generation. Catherine’s strong personality was shaped by her favourite verse in the Bible. That text was ‘My grace is sufficient for you.’ As a child she learned that verse by heart; as the wife of William Booth, amidst the stress and strain of a stormy and eventful life she trusted in the promise it enshrined. She often quoted the text to her family, emphasising the grace of Christ that gives strength in weakness. When Catherine lay dying, she was not able to speak. She pointed her family to a wall-text, which for a long time had been placed opposite her bed, so that her eyes could rest upon it. With unwavering confidence, even though she couldn’t speak, the dying Catherine pointed her children to the deathless message: ‘My grace is sufficient for you.’ Her biographer wrote: ‘The wall-text was taken down and placed near her on the bed. But it was no longer needed. The promise had been completely fulfilled.’

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Perhaps you’re aware this morning of a painful burden you carry, or an affliction that makes life hard for you. The apostle Paul learned an insight that’s one of life’s deepest secrets. This message came from the risen Christ as Paul prayed to have his painful suffering removed: ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Paul passed this insight on to the Christians in Corinth, and to God’s people for all time. When we, too, become powerless and vulnerable, if we call out to the Lord, the grace of Christ will be shown and the power of Christ will rest on us.

‘Loving Father God, we thank you this morning for the grace, mercy and kindness you have shown us in Christ. We find it hard to face sorrows and losses, and they can easily make us hard and bitter. We run to your arms with our burdens because we know there is grace sufficient, boundless and free already there. In our weakness sustain us with your strength. We offer our prayer in the mighty name of Jesus, our crucified Saviour and risen Lord. Amen.’