

Sermon Series:

# **Our God will go before us**

*Exodus 33 & 34*

## **THE ALL-SUFFICIENT PRESENCE OF GOD**

**2 Corinthians 1:8-11; 4:6-10; 12:7-10**

Becky Douglass (28/01/2024)

---

What do you think of when you think of the Apostle Paul? What picture do you have of him in your mind? Do you think of him as a great intellectual who worked out the theology of our faith as found in the New Testament – much of which you have difficulty understanding! Do you think of him as the intrepid missionary who travelled all over the Roman world, facing persecution and trials - but taking it all in his stride with barely a pause to wrap up his wounds? Do you see him as a spiritual giant who walked so closely with God that he lived life on another plane, unaffected by the mundane daily struggles you face?

There is no question that Paul was one of the most important people in shaping the Christian faith as we know it. But he wasn't some kind of spiritual superhero! If all we had was the account of his life and ministry we find in Acts, we might come away with that impression. However, in some of Paul's letters, we get a glimpse of the man behind the writings and missionary adventures. Last year, we studied 1 Corinthians in our Grace Groups. We saw that he did not have an easy relationship with the church in Corinth. He faced challenges to his leadership and conflict over some of the positions he took about issues they were facing.

His next letter to them, 2 Corinthians, is one of his most personal letters. He continues to face challenges to his leadership. Others within the church community were more elaborate speakers and more charismatic leaders. They claimed special knowledge of God through visions and experiences, and they seemed to have it all put together. As Paul responds to this challenge, he doesn't try to compete with them, boasting of his successes, instead he opens up to the church and vulnerably tells them his struggles, but in doing so, he also shares with them, and us, a great treasure – the all-sufficiency of the presence of God.

This morning, we will look at three short passages where Paul talks about some of the struggles he's faced and what he has learned from them. They are just few verses within a long letter, but there is so much we can learn from Paul's experiences and thinking.

### **It's not about me (1:8-11)**

Paul begins his letter by talking about an overwhelming situation which he had faced. We don't know exactly what he was talking about. The Greek words he uses can refer to either physical or emotional distress. I find the New Living Translation helpful.

*We were crushed and overwhelmed beyond our ability to endure, and we thought we would never live through it. In fact, we expected to die. But as a result, we stopped relying on ourselves and learned to rely only on God, who raises the dead. (1:8,9 NLT)*

The Greek words are also sometimes used to refer to a ship weighed down so much so that it can no longer float, and so it sinks. This is how Paul felt, totally overwhelmed by whatever he was facing and in danger of sinking beyond hope of recovery. But in the depths, where he expected to die, God reached out to him and rescued him. God had delivered him in the past, he was confident God would deliver him in the future, and this gave him confidence that God was always delivering him, continuously, in the present.

Sometimes when we seek to encourage someone who is going through a difficult time, we'll say things like: "God will never give you anything you can't handle." or "God will make you strong enough to handle that." I'm not sure Paul would agree with these statements. I think what he is saying is that it is not about what I can handle at all. He learned, through these difficulties, that he couldn't handle everything - his own abilities weren't enough. However, he learned that he could rely totally on God. Even when we all we can see is death, at that moment, we discover that God has defeated death – it is not obstacle to Him. Paul was able to endure extreme hardship, not because he was a particularly strong, resilient person or some kind of super-saint, but because he relied totally on God's ability to do what he could not do.

### **It's all about God (12:7-10)**

As an apostle of Jesus Christ, Paul experienced many things. On the negative side, he had experience beatings, shipwrecks, imprisonments, hunger and cold. (see 11:25-33) On the positive side, he had had visions of God that were beyond description. (see 12:1-4) It would have been easy for him to forget that it was God who had taken him through the hard times and given him the good times. He could have become conceited like the other leaders in Corinth.

However, in chapter 12, he reveals that there was something that stopped him from ever thinking that he had something to boast about. Paul calls it his "thorn in the flesh". Again, we don't know exactly what was involved, but there was something in his life that caused him personal suffering. It might have been some kind of physical ailment or impairment. It could have been a difficult personal relationship, or any number of other things. All we know is that it caused Paul great distress. One commentator says about it, "The effect of its presence was to cripple Paul's enjoyment of life and frustrate his efficiency by draining his energies". It was something significant.

Three times, Paul asked God to remove this and three times, God said no. I think this shows us that it is legitimate to ask God to remove something that is bothering us.

Remember, even Jesus asked his Father to remove the cross. But we also see that there comes a time when we need to accept God's answer even if it is not what we want. Paul asked three times – but not ten times. God is not a vending machine who always gives us exactly what we think we want or need. Sometimes, we need to trust Him to know what is best.

In Paul's case, God had a lesson to teach him, something that was so important that God needed to give Paul a constant reminder of it. God's answer to Paul's 'thorn in the flesh' was not to remove it, but to show Paul a different way to live with it.

*He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness". (12:9)*

Paul wanted God to take away the thing that was making him weak. God wanted to teach him that his weakness could be the channel of God's power in him. When we are strong, we don't think we need God, therefore God's can't work. But when we are weak, we know we need God, and we are more willing to allow God to work His power in us.

We hate weakness. We want to be strong and be able to handle everything on our own. When we are faced with weakness, sometimes we try to hide it and act like nothing is wrong – the "stiff upper lip" approach. To admit weakness makes us vulnerable so we hide it. Or maybe we just try to tough it out and tell ourselves, "Whatever doesn't kill me will make me stronger!" Except that is not true, is it? Many people are permanently wounded by the things that happen to them. They make it through, but they aren't stronger. Or maybe we try to "look on the bright side" and find the positive in everything, refusing to acknowledge the realities of what we are facing. The answer to our weakness is not hiding it, getting stronger or positive thinking, it is reliance on God's all-sufficient power. It is admitting I can't handle it and allowing God to display his power in my life.

Paul's 'thorn in the flesh' reminded him every day to look to God for His strength and His power. This changed his perspective on trials. When something negative happened, he didn't panic because he knew that God could handle it. He was no longer afraid of what might happen because he knew that God's presence in his life was sufficient for anything. He says that he "*delights in weaknesses*". (11:10). Probably a better translation is that he "*rests content in weaknesses*". He doesn't seek out difficulties or think they are fun! They have no value in and of themselves – suffering is hard. But if difficulties come to him, he can rest content because he knows that God's grace is sufficient, and God's power will be enough.

### **God's power in jars of clay (4:6-10)**

There is one more passage that we've skipped over – chapter 4. In these verses, Paul uses a picture to help us understand what he has learned.

*But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us (4:7)*

God's people are jars of clay - just ordinary, frail human beings – frail physically, emotionally, spiritually. We chip and crack under pressure! God never expects us to be able to handle everything that happens to us on our own. However, we were created to hold the one who can handle them – our all-sufficient God.

Because we are human jars of clay, the circumstances of our lives affect us. Paul says that we are pressed, perplexed, persecuted, and struck down. But because of God's presence within us, when we are pressed, we are not completely crushed; when we are perplexed, it does not lead us to despair; when we are persecuted, we are not abandoned by Him; when we are struck down, we are not so destroyed that He cannot help us to get up again. He holds us together, and our frail humanity just makes his power shine forth even more.

### **Implications for us**

So, if we are jars of clay but containing the all-sufficient presence of God, what should be our response when we encounter difficulties?

First, we need to ACCEPT two things:

- We are humans and therefore we have weaknesses. Often, we are taught to cover up our weaknesses, that it is shameful to need help. What unhelpful pressure this puts on us! This has never been God's intention for us. As one person has said, "Christianity is not the removal of weakness, nor is it merely the manifestation of divine power; it is the manifestation of divine power in human weakness."<sup>1</sup>
- Bad things will happen and sometimes overwhelm us. Sin is real and we will be hurt by it at times. If we really believe that God's grace is sufficient, then we don't need to be afraid of this.

Secondly, we need to TRUST God:

- God knows you and cares about your life and well-being. His love is the basis for everything else. He could be all-powerful and not care about us. That would be horrible. But He does care, and He chooses to be with us.
- God's presence within you, through the Holy Spirit, brings to you all that He is and all that He has. He is enough. Nothing is too small for Him to care about or too big for Him to handle.
- He is working for our good and that He knows what He is doing – even if it looks different to what we think He should be doing. So often we only see one possible solution to a difficulty, but God isn't so limited in His outlook. To illustrate this, let's liken your life to a trip down a river. As you go through your life, you work to stay in the current and navigate around obstacles. But then you see in the distance a big boulder in the river that you know you won't be able to navigate around. You start praying, asking God to remove the boulder. From your perspective, this is the only solution. The only way you can go forward is if the boulder is removed. But is that the only thing that could be done? What if God left the boulder in place, but raised the

---

<sup>1</sup> Quote and river illustration from Twelve Baskets Full Vol. 2 by Watchman Nee (p. 28,29)

water level so that you could get over the boulder? Then the boulder would no longer be an obstacle! It's probably not the solution that we would ever come up with, but it isn't outside the power of God. When we encounter problems, we're tempted to think that the only solution is to remove the problem. But what if God could work in that situation so that the problem was no longer a problem? Maybe we just need to trust God to work and not try to tell Him what to do!

Finally, there are things we can do to SUPPORT others when they are going through difficult times:

- Allow people to be weak humans – just like we are! Don't make light of their problems and don't expect them to find it easy. Like Paul, they may well have times when they feel completely overwhelmed by their situation. I remember there was a time when I was struggling with an issue which had gone on for a while and wasn't getting any better, in fact it was getting worse. I remember discovering Paul's admission in chapter 1 that he had a time when he was under so much pressure that He had despaired of life. I was so encouraged that if he could feel that way and find God there, then I could too. I mentioned this to one of our pastors at the time and he immediately jumped in to correct me, saying Christians never despaired, that was sinful, and Paul must have just been exaggerating to make a point. This was devastating to me. I learned that it wasn't OK to admit weakness or doubt around him. I pray that here, in this church, we can be a safe place where people can admit that life is hard sometimes.
- Be channels of God's presence in their lives. Just be with them. You don't need to have all the answers or know all the right things to do. Listen to them and assure them that you will be there when they need someone to talk to. Sometimes they may need practical help, but more than anything, people who are overwhelmed just need to know they are not alone. You can be God's presence "in the flesh" for them.
- Pray – it does make a difference. Paul thanks them for their involvement "*as you help us with your prayers*". (1:11) This is something all of us can do!

God gives us this promise: "*My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.*" How do you feel about this promise? What difference could it make in your life? Maybe you are currently feeling overwhelmed by something. It is big and you know it could crush you. Or maybe it is not what is happening right now, but something that might happen in the future that fills you with dread. You are afraid that if that one thing happened to you, you couldn't handle it.

I won't give any examples – partly because I don't want to limit your thinking, but also because I don't want anyone to think I am picking on you! But I don't think I need to give examples as I am sure for many of you, something immediately jumped into your mind. You know what your greatest fears are – as I know mine. As you think about this thing, however, the issue is not if you can handle it, the issue is whether you can trust God to handle it.

I know for myself that there have been times when I knew I should trust God and not be afraid. I knew He was all I needed, but I just found it hard to truly let go of my fear and rest

content in Him. In those moments, I have found myself echoing the cry of the father who brought his son to Jesus for healing, *“Lord, I believe, help my unbelief!”* *“Lord, I trust you, help me to trust you more!”* (Mark 9:24) Jesus didn’t turn that father away and He won’t turn you away either. He will meet you where you are and enable you to grow into a deeper relationship of trust in Him.