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Sermon preached by Mr. J. Delves at "Ebenezer", Clapham on Wednesday evening 30.11.49

49/B

Text 2 Corinthians 12.9 "And He said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee"

This is the Lord's answer to one of His servants, who was favoured with no mean degree of knowledge and understanding in the Gospel. It must be admitted that the Apostle Paul was an extraordinary case, an extraordinary character and had an extraordinary experience. He was one greatly favoured, he was one greatly tried, which is often the case in the Lord's disposing of things with His people, whereby those who are more deeply led into the mysteries of grace, the gospel and the knowledge of God, are more deeply led also into the depths of depravity within, the workings of evil there, and their own base, vile, deceitful hearts, which are "deceitful above all things and desperately wicked". The Apostle Paul was very clearly and graciously instructed and established in both law and gospel; he knew the condemnation of the law, he knew the liberating power of the gospel; his religion was no speculative theory, but the work of the Spirit of God in his own soul in conviction and revelation, and although we cannot lay claim to such heights or depths, possibly, yet in that measure in which we are taught and led, we shall know those two opposites and shall have some experience of both law and gospel.

In the chapter that I read, (Romans 7) the Apostle opens up the conflict of his own mind with regard to the workings of sin within him, which brought a painful sense of personal inability, helplessness, condemnation, and misery; yes, it brought him to that place to have to lament of himself, "O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" He knew what it was to groan on account of sin and to rejoice under a view of the gospel of forgiveness, mercy, grace and love, through the redemption of Christ; to him "Christ was All and in all", to him there was "neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free: but Christ is all, and in all." What a

mercy to have a religion like that, a religion where the glorious, blessed Redeemer is made precious in the soul of a poor, sensible sinner, where there is such a vacancy and necessity for Him as though nought else can satisfy but a personal manifestation. The Apostle was brought to a point in things; he does not query them but declares the truth as it was revealed to him, and speaks of the overturning of things in his own life and experience, of the value of Christ and his willingness to "count all things but loss, that he might win Christ and be found in Him". Nothing else could be compared with the excellency of that knowledge. Thus we have to see that he was well instructed and well established in the foundation truths of the blessed gospel.

But there was one thing that was an occasion of irritation, trouble, vexation and disturbance to his mind; there was evidently something that, in the nature of it, to him at least, was repugnant, mortifying, distasteful, and which naturally, he bitterly resented and was deeply concerned and anxious to have removed from him. This is spoken of in his own words as referring particularly to himself. It is noticeable that in speaking of the abundance of the revelations, he speaks in the second person, of knowing "a man in Christ above fourteen years ago" who was "caught up to the third heaven" and "heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter. Of such an one will I glory: yet of myself I will not glory, but in mine infirmities". But he has to relate to us what he passed through first, before he could glory in those infirmities, and how he waited upon God for a certain thing to be removed from him, and the way the Lord responded, which was not according to his natural wishes, originally, or what he prayed for, yet was what his faith received from the Lord Himself, whereby under a gracious, holy submission, he says, "Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me."

Before this however he speaks of having a thorn in the flesh. We are not informed actually or precisely what this was, although a number of suggestions or speculations have been made concerning it; but it would seem apparent that it was something of an external

nature pertaining to his body, probably something about him, some infirmity of a mortifying nature that was a continual maul to him, and which he may have felt stood greatly in the way of his usefulness. This, of course, is only assumed, but of this we are quite assured that it was a painful thing to him literally, as a thorn in the flesh would be; it was a painful, bitter thing; not an indifferent consideration, not something for which he had little concern whether he had it or not, but something of such a nature that he presented and earnestly desired to have it removed from him. O how little do we know what may be best for us and when nature comes in, we would pray to have that removed from us, that may be the best for us, for "we know not what to pray for as we ought." We would have our wisdom go before the Lord's, and think we know what is detrimental or an hindrance to us, and how much better it would appear if this or that burden, trial, weakness or irritating thing were taken completely out of the way; but how different is the Lord's way in things, He does not so dispose it to us, but rather does assure us that there will be these things that shall be a continual cross to us, so that we have to say as Hezekiah said, "O Lord, by these things men live, and in all these things is the life of my spirit".

One striking thing about this thorn in the flesh was that the Apostle knew who had given it to him; he does not say, 'By some unaccountable means, I do not know how, I have got this trouble, this irritating thing, this affliction, this thorn in the flesh. No, he does not say so, but he says, "There was given to me a thorn in the flesh". Not only so, but he knew quite clearly Who gave it to him, because he prays to the Lord to remove it. He says, "There was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me!" but the fact, in itself, that he knew Who gave it to him, did not reconcile him to it, or bring his spirit to be submissive, to endure it, or to continue in it - not that knowledge in itself.

O friends, it may be sometimes that certain things are clearly seen to be of the Lord's hand to us, certain trials, this or that painful, difficult thing, that irritating circumstance, something that may continually come up in the life, that stirs up, it may be,

all the mire and filth of poor fallen human depravity: yet it may be, as a gracious person, you may see, as you would believe, that the hand of the Lord is in all your providences, that He has given this thing for you to carry, and yet that in itself may not, will not probably, reconcile you to that particular thorn in the flesh or that cross that may be laid upon you.

There is a more striking feature than all this about the thorn in the flesh that Paul had; not only did He know Who gave it to him, but he knew why it was given to him. This he emphatically affirms, twice in one verse; he tells us why the thorn in the flesh was given to him - "Lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me", and then it is repeated, "Lest I should be exalted above measure." Is not this a remarkable feature? The Apostle does not say, 'I cannot think why I have got this! Why should I have to put up with this mortifying thing? I see no reason for this chastening, of what purpose is it? Why should I be thus afflicted?' No, nothing of that, his vision is clear as to the cause of it, why it was laid upon him. It is very sweet to see that the Apostle never asserts himself to be immune from certain propensities of nature; he frankly admits here that he was liable to be inflated with pride, to be lifted up, elated, exalted above measure.

You see, we are such poor weak things, even if we hope we have grace, that if left to ourselves we shall find that pride -

"The heart uplifts with God's own gifts,
And makes e'en grace, a snare."

No question about that! So the Apostle admits of himself.

There is a great difference between being "exalted above measure" and being humbled under a sense of the Lord's goodness and mercy for such a revelation. It is a sad thing to become proud of some particular experience that we may think outstanding; to become proud of it is to abuse it, but to be humbled by it before the Lord as the work of His grace in us, is a different thing. Paul said, "Lest I be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations". We cannot say much about these revelations or what the Apostle saw.

It was evidently something very remarkable, altogether unusual, so that he could hardly tell whether he was in the body or out of it, but was as one "caught up to the third heaven", "caught up into paradise and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter." A very remarkable, extraordinary experience! But you see the Lord disposed a ballast, He did not say, 'This man has such a wonderful experience, We must remove everything that would tend to trouble and disturb his mind, so that he can live in the complete enjoyment of it without anything to distract or trouble him.' No, but the Lord disposed a ballast, "a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet him."

Is not this followed out in the experience of the Lord's people? Has it not ever been so, more or less? There will be this thorn in the flesh. Life will not be without a cross, without its afflictions and difficulties in some form or other, as the Lord disposes. There was a thorn in the flesh.

Another remarkable feature about this is that the Apostle perceived equally clearly that not only was the hand of the Lord in this thing but the hand of Satan too. It is a little like it was with Job when he went up to sacrifice before the Lord and Satan also presented himself there. There was the Lord dealing with Job and there was Satan too. So here the Apostle not only sees the Lord's hand in this but he perceives also the hand of Satan, the messenger of Satan to buffet him. To buffet him! This evidently intends that it was something continually, as it were, beating up against him with such a force as to make it difficult for him to continue under the pain of it. The messenger of Satan to buffet him! Now depend upon it, beloved hearers, if we are the Lord's children and have any measure of gracious teaching and revelation in the truth, if it be that we are brought to the knowledge of Christ and have Him revealed to us, made precious, formed in our hearts the hope of glory, we shall be sure to have also the messenger of Satan to buffet us; and that will be possibly, by certain forceful, sharp, bitter temptations that will strive right

against that which is the foundation and comfort of all our hope and peace and joy. If you find in your experience the Person of Christ brings a sweet, holy joy into your heart, and moves your affections towards Him in worship and love, Satan will strike in your heart against the Person of Christ and thus you will have this messenger to buffet you. O how he will attempt to overthrow those principles in your heart relating to this vital thing. I believe it is the same with regard to the atonement; if we are favoured with some application of this in our souls and know the forgiveness of sin and the peace that it brings into the heart and conscience, Satan will strike right at the atonement and try to overturn that in your heart if he can.

Not only so, there may be some infirmity that we have to carry that Satan will use; he will, if I may so express it, make use of that very infirmity or cross the Lord has laid upon us for certain wise purposes; he may make use of that cross, that particular trial, it may be in your life, that bitter thing, take it up and present it before your mind and try to stir you up in a most awful rebellion about it. O why should you have to have this thing, why should this infirmity be upon you, why should this affliction be, why should this cross be in your life? Satan is a master of polemic to argue against God and His grace in the heart of a poor sinner; he is the most subtle, plausible serpent that ever was. The messenger of Satan to buffet us; so that we need not be surprised at the opposition that will continually rise up in this way. Depend upon it, if the Lord has to do with us, Satan will too; if the Lord bestows some mercy on us and blesses us with His Gospel and the knowledge of Himself, Satan will be at the cross roads to stir us up in all kinds of bitterness, enmity and rebellion against those very things which are best for us, after all.

Well, here is this thorn in the flesh. Say you, I wonder what it was? Well, it does not matter to us what it was, the teaching here is designed for us; it does not matter to us what Paul's thorn was, but the Lord will see to it that we shall know what ours is; you will know what yours is, and you will find this messenger of

Satan continually buffeting you. The Apostle said, "Lest I *should* be exalted above measure" - so these things are to keep the Lord's people down, humble before Him, in their right place, walking tenderly and carefully in the conflict. The Apostle took a wise course about this, in that he prayed to the Lord concerning it. Moreover we read of him, "For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me". You see he did not pray for grace to bear it, saying, 'Lord, Thou knowest all things; Thou knowest it is best for me not to be without it; help me to be submissive to it'; no, not that at first, but that it might depart from him he besought the Lord thrice. He did not just say a prayer, and say, 'It does not matter much; I must bear it; I will say no more about it' No, he besought the Lord thrice - and when things lie heavily upon you, you have to pray continually, not just once, but to take it again and again and again; and yet we know not what may be best for us in it. Here it may be observed that this is not a criterion, that though the Lord thus responded to Paul, it does not follow that He will say so in every instance precisely. There are some trying things in our lives that the Lord disposes to remove in answer to prayer and has done so in remarkable ways, interposed and heard and answered prayer and removed things absolutely; but it was not so in this case. Why was it not so in this case? It was not so in this case because it was better for Paul to have the thorn than to be without it; it was better for Paul to prove the all-sufficiency of God's grace to support him in that tribulation than to be without the tribulation. Is that not sometimes so? Is it not better for us that we have tribulation and Christ, than no tribulation and no Christ? Is it not designed so to be in the Lord's wisdom with those who follow Him? "If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me." It was better for Paul to prove the all-sufficient grace than to be exalted above measure, was it not? The Lord knows best. Perhaps you say, 'O but I could get on much better without this irritating thing which I have continually to bear that stirs up so much of old nature'; but the Lord knows best. O but when this thing, whatever it may be,

stirs up so much of old nature, does that not bring a sense of guilt and shame, before the Lord? "My grace is sufficient for thee." O how we have to prove that of ourselves we have nought but sin! If we have anything beside, it is that which the Lord has given. But things will be balanced and the "balancings of the clouds" are of Him. He knows best.

"My Father's hand prepares the cup
And what He wills is best."

Paul prayed three times. "For this I besought the Lord thrice. He prayed once - but the thorn still keeps pricking; he prayed again, the thorn still keeps pricking; he prayed again, the thorn still keeps pricking! Of what use praying then? Of what use going to God about it? Why not make the best of it and get on as well as we can? O no, although the thorn kept pricking, the Lord was not silent, was He? No, the Lord responded to the Apostle and it was a remarkable answer when it came. I should think that according to this, the answer, the Lord's voice, was not heard at the first time of praying, the Lord's voice was not heard at the second time of praying or else he would not have had need to pray again - but - "I besought the Lord thrice."

"It might depart from me". He did not pray the first time that it might depart, and then the second say, 'Lord, Thou knowest all things, perhaps it is better for me to bear it, give me grace', and the third time, 'Evidently it is Thy purpose that I should have it, as it is not removed, I fall into Thy hand.' No, each time he prayed that it might depart from him! That is just like us is it not? We would have it depart from us, we would not have this thing, we do not want to bear it, it is so mortifying, we are resentful, it is distasteful, Lord, take it away, it seems the best thing. He besought the Lord thrice about this thing.

Some of you may know something about this. It may seem so necessary for this or that trial to be removed from us, we do not want this thorn in the flesh. But then you see, the Lord's thoughts are not our thoughts, nor our ways His ways. He besought the Lord thrice. The striking feature about this is that when the Lord did speak, He made no direct reference to the thorn in the

flesh at all. No, He made no reference to the thorn in the flesh, but just said this, "My grace is sufficient for thee: for My strength is made perfect in weakness". Evidently when the Apostle prayed, he prayed for something concerning his body but when the Lord answered him He answered him in his soul. When Paul prayed it was about something of nature, but when the Lord answered it was of grace. When Paul prayed it was a material thing evidently, but when the Lord answered, it was a spiritual reply. "My grace is sufficient for thee". 'O but this thorn is so painful it wears me down'. 'Yes, but "My grace is sufficient for thee". Have you something in your life or position or office that is more than you feel you can bear so that you do not know how to go on or what to do with it? There is one answer, "My grace is sufficient for thee".

The way this was received was very confirming; there was a resentment because of the thorn, but there was no resentment because of the Lord's answer; nothing more is said about removing it in this case, but there is a sweet submission to the Lord's purpose. The Lord answered him not according to nature but according to grace. The Lord answered him in a way that would be for His own glory, in manifesting the power of grace to sustain him under this infirmity. "Most gladly therefore" - (that was a great thing to say, was it not?) - "Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me." Most gladly will I keep this thorn, continue in this trial, bear this cross, endure this mortifying thing, that the power of Christ may rest upon me, that His strength may be made perfect in my weakness, What gracious submission to the Lord's purpose in it! At the same time let me say, this is not designed by the Lord as a sure guide in every case or with all the Lord's people, as though He would never remove a trial, affliction, cross, pain or grief; but when that is needful for us in the Lord's purposes, He will continue the trial and give sufficient grace to bear it. Moreover the triumph of grace here consisted in the Apostle's whole-hearted acceptance of the answer. There was no quarrel here, as though he would say, 'That is not the answer I wanted, I want the thorn

removed, never mind about the grace, it is the thorn that concerns me'. No, no! "Most gladly will I rather glory in my infirmities", that is he would rejoice in his tribulation "knowing that tribulation worketh patience; and patience, experience; and experience, hope; and hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts." The sweetest place after all is to fall into the Lord's hands. Moreover if the Lord so disposes He can remove the burden, the cross, the trial if that is better for us, but the remarkable feature of this is Paul's realising why the thorn in the flesh was given to him: he must have seen the purpose of it; he saw the purpose of the trial, yet wanted it removed. Is that not like us? "Lest I should be exalted above measure this was given to me". He saw the end, but seeing the end is not submission to it; perceiving the end is not glorying in the infirmity; but when the Lord speaks is there not a power in that word? Then you can take up your cross and follow Him? "My grace is sufficient for thee", sufficient for this thorn.

But what a difference there is in just looking at this, and seeing actually that it was sufficient for Paul, and proving that sufficiency ourselves; yet it is in the trial that the sufficiency of grace is proved. If there is no trial, there is no test. When we are able to feel the sustaining power of God's grace in these difficult things, when His strength is made perfect in our weakness, then not only do we perceive the end, but fall into the Lord's hands, knowing that His will is best for us. O how we should shape things up should we not if we could? We should have no trouble, no thorn in the flesh, no crook in the lot, nothing to disturb us; but where should we soon be? The Lord knows best; and what a mercy it is that the Lord's poor, needy people do sometimes prove in a very sweet and blessed way the all-sufficiency of this grace and that is better than to be without the trouble. To have the Lord with us in a trouble supporting and sustaining us is evidently better for us. "Therefore", Paul said, "I would gladly glory in my infirmities." "My grace is sufficient for thee, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." Amen