

GRACE IS SUFFICIENT

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Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you." (2 Corinthians 12:7-9a)

Earlier this year I took note of a news story announcing the death of a man who had lived a complicated life. Oskar Groening was a 96-year old retired personnel director of a glass factory in Germany. In the mid-1980s he found himself increasingly at odds with a segment of German society known as holocaust deniers. Groening had a message for those who would try to revise or minimize the record of Nazi Germany's extermination of 6 million Jews in the World War Two death camps: *"I would like you to believe me. I saw the gas chambers. I saw the crematoria. I saw the open fires. I would like you to believe that these atrocities happened, because I was there."*

Groening spoke with authority. He was there. You see, as a young man coming of age in 1930s Germany, Groening had been caught up in all the Nazi propaganda, and joined Hitler's elite SS unit of the military. He was stationed at the death camp in Auschwitz, where his duties involved sorting and counting valuables taken from the incoming prisoners. Groening described himself as a mere cog in the gears. He never directly harmed any captives, and after witnessing the unspeakable horrors inflicted upon them, three times he appealed for a transfer, even if it meant going to the western front. Finally, he was sent to the infantry in Belgium, where he was injured and captured by the British. After the war he returned to Germany and lived a quiet life. Always haunted by what he saw at Auschwitz, and his complicity in it, he began speaking out against the holocaust deniers. It became his mission. Possibly, it could be his road to redemption.

Ironically, Groening's own public testimonies of his presence at Auschwitz eventually attracted the attention of more than the holocaust deniers. Also listening in were those determined to bring the last Nazi war criminals to justice. In 2014 Groening was charged with being an accessory to the murder of 300,000 Jews. A year later he was tried, convicted, and sentenced to four years in prison. He remained free on appeal until March of this year, when he died of natural causes. Upon Groening's death, the Simon Wiesenthal Center – a human rights organization dedicated to holocaust research – lamented that another Nazi war criminal had escaped justice. *"Their victims never had any appeals, nor did their tormentors have any mercy, consequently these perpetrators don't deserve either."* What do you think? What do you think of Oskar Groening?

What do you think of Paul the Apostle? To be sure, the man formerly known as Saul of Tarsus lived a complicated life. In his Second Letter to the Corinthians, a portion of which we've heard today, Paul wrote to a congregation of Christians that he himself had founded. Apparently, in Paul's absence, some new Christian leaders had attached themselves to the Corinthian church, claiming that they, and not Paul, represented the Jerusalem apostles. Today we don't know for certain who these opponents of Paul actually were. Theories abound, and to be honest, we only have Paul's side of the story. Nevertheless, it seems that Paul's opponents in Corinth sought to challenge his authority, question his theology, and discredit his character. In so doing they were dividing the congregation into competing factions, prompting Paul to write the epistle we know as Second Corinthians. What we have before us today is only eight verses of a letter that is 13 chapters long. But what we hear in those eight verses is a portion of Paul's attempt to defend

himself: to reestablish his credibility and standing as the founding apostle of the Corinthian congregation.

One of the ongoing charges that Paul had to face was that he never knew Jesus during his earthly ministry. The Jerusalem apostles were those whom Jesus had chosen to be part of his mission before the crucifixion and resurrection. Paul came later. So Paul always had the extra burden of arguing his legitimacy. Yes, he really did know Jesus. No, he wasn't there when Jesus multiplied the loaves and fishes, but he had met the risen Christ who reigns in glory at the right hand of God. We heard Paul today writing about himself, cleverly disguised: *I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven ... and I know that such a person was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat.* Paul wanted the Corinthians to know that he derived his authority from having been in the presence of Christ. He was there. In much the same way that God had called the great prophets of Israel into his heavenly chambers, so also had God commissioned Paul to speak. Therefore, if Paul wanted to boast, he could boast.

Instead of boasting, Paul chose to focus on something he called his thorn in the flesh. For Paul, the thorn was obviously a negative thing. It was a constant, annoying, painful reality that he wished he could extract, but couldn't. Three times he prayed intensely that God would remove the thorn, but the answer he received was, "My grace is sufficient for you." Apparently, the Corinthian congregation knew exactly what Paul was talking about when he referred to that which tormented him. But for us, 2,000 years later, the whole thing is shrouded in mystery. Once again, theories abound. Some say it was a physical condition: a speech impediment, epilepsy, leprosy. Others speculate that it was an internal struggle with a temptation he fought to resist. The truth is, we just don't know.

I'm afraid that all we can do today is add to the speculation about the nature of Paul's thorn in the flesh. But allow me to share some observations that may be helpful. I note that when Paul prayed for God to remove the thorn, God's remedy was grace. *My grace is sufficient for you.* Could it be that the remedy itself offers a clue to the nature of the malady? If so we might ask, what does God's grace chiefly do? Much as we wish it sometimes would, grace doesn't take away cuts and bruises, remove splinters, cure the common cold, or eliminate physical pain. Instead, grace makes us worthy to stand in God's presence. Grace forgives our sins, reconciles us to God, and allows us to be new creations for whom the old has passed away. Whatever the malady was that ailed Paul, the remedy was grace.

So it stands to reason that if grace was the remedy, then some combination of guilt, regret, and remorse was the malady. Something or someone may have been dredging up Paul's past, and using it to question his standing before God and in the church. As many of you know, Paul had a past, and not a pretty one. Prior to his Damascus Road conversion, Paul the Apostle was known as Saul of Tarsus. As such he had deep connections to the Jerusalem Temple. He was either a Pharisee of a particularly zealous sort, or a member of the Temple Police. Perhaps he was both. In any case, Paul was no mere cog in the gears. He had far-reaching authority from the chief priests to enforce the correct keeping of Torah amongst his fellow Jews.

Concerning the Christians, they represented the latest corruption of Israel's faith in the one, true God. Paul himself would write to the Galatians: *You have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it.* To this end we know that he was pursuing Christians as far away as Damascus and dragging them back to prison. He also presided over at least one execution – the stoning of Stephen, the first deacon in the Jerusalem church, and the first Christian martyr. Did Paul himself throw the stones? No, but he was there. He saw the whole thing. So what do you think of Paul the Apostle, formerly known as Saul of Tarsus? Paul had a past that only the grace of God could be sufficient to heal. Even still, the sight of Stephen, dead and bloody in the dirt, must have haunted his memory like a thorn in the flesh.

Now add to Paul's own guilty conscience the constant reality of his opponents. Some indications suggest that those who challenged his authority in Corinth were Christians from Jerusalem. I ask you: what might some longstanding members of the Jerusalem Church think of Paul the Apostle? They would think he was no apostle at all. He was Saul of Tarsus, who persecuted them and killed their brother, Stephen. *"We know this man,"* they would have said, *"and the leopard can't change his spots. How dare he claim to be an Apostle?"* I think it's entirely plausible that Paul's opponents consisted of people whom he had directly or indirectly harmed, and that these people could never, ever stomach the thought of Paul as a leader in the church, no matter how much time had passed. They would make it their mission to follow him, remind him, accuse him, and discredit him. And so it may have been: Paul's own temptation to pull himself down again into guilt over what he had done, infected anew by his opponents who dogged him everywhere he went, this deadly combination accounted for his thorn in the flesh. It was the type of torment for which only God's grace could be sufficient.

Think of all the factors in life that work to pull us down from grace. Even Jesus dealt with realities of deep disappointment that could have caused him to question his own calling and identity. We've heard in today's reading from the Gospel of Mark (6:1-13) how he preached in his hometown synagogue and was rejected. *"We know him," they said. "This is the carpenter, the son of Mary, the brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon. And his sisters are right there. Who does he think he is, preaching these things to us?"* The sad truth is, Jesus couldn't convince his own family to accept the kingdom of God as he proclaimed it. I've often thought that Jesus must have carried a sorrow in his soul that his hometown rejected him, and his family completely misunderstood him. But God's grace was sufficient for Jesus, and he pressed on without being pulled down from his heavenly calling.

Paul pressed on as well, despite the particular thorn he carried with him wherever he went. He came to understand it as a way to identify with the suffering of Jesus, and he undoubtedly used it to identify with others who suffered, and connect them to Jesus. Paul never gave into his opponents who tried to pull him down from the grace in which God was pleased for him to stand. This tells me that you and I have a choice as to how we respond to our deep regrets that dog us through life, and pierce our consciences like thorns in our flesh. We can fall back into guilt and despair, and buy into the world's disbelief that we are children of God with a heavenly calling. Or we can rely daily on God's grace and forgiveness, which is sufficient to make us and keep us as new creations, reconciled to God through Christ.

What do you think of Paul the Apostle? What do you think of Oskar Groening? Can God's grace be sufficient for them? Many would say no; it is not possible for any such person to travel the road to redemption. But at least one holocaust survivor disagrees. Eva Mozes Kor was 10-years old when her entire family was taken to Auschwitz. She and her twin sister were the only ones to survive, even though subjected to medical experiments. Today she lives in Indiana, and preaches that forgiveness is the better way. Before Groening died she had the opportunity to meet him at his trial. What did she do? She thanked him for speaking up and telling the truth for all the years he did. Then she forgave and embraced the former Nazi. She tweeted a photo of the encounter around the world. She wrote: *"I know many people will criticize me for this photo, but so be it. It was two human beings seventy years after it happened. For the life of me I will never understand why anger is preferable to a goodwill gesture. Nothing good ever comes from anger."* And she added, *"Forgiveness is the best revenge of all."*

St. Paul declared that he heard the Lord say to him, *"My grace is sufficient for you."*

What do you think?