

## “Sufficient Grace”

Deuteronomy 8:1-10 • 2 Corinthians 12:1-10

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX  
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In March, 2003, four-year-old Colton’s appendix ruptured, threatening his life. He was rushed to the hospital and taken to emergency surgery. The surgeon warned his parents that Colton was in grave danger. When he came out of the surgery, he began telling them that he had been to heaven. He described seeing Jesus, angels, a rainbow horse, and family members he had never met. And everyone had wings. His father eventually hired a writer to put it all down into a book called *Heaven is for Real: A Little Boy’s Astounding Story of His Trip to Heaven and Back*. The book, released in 2010, has sold over 11 million copies and was made into a movie.

*Heaven is Real* is in a category of books sold by Christian publishers that always sells well. It’s what some people call “heaven tourism” books. These are books that claim to be about different people’s “experience” in heaven and then they came back to write a book about it. The books have titles like *Proof of Heaven: A Neurosurgeon’s Journey into the Afterlife*; and *To Heaven and Back: A Doctor’s Extraordinary Account of Her Death, Heaven, Angels, and Life Again*. Many of these books, like Don Piper’s *90 Minutes in Heaven*, never even mention Jesus.

The same year that *Heaven Is For Real* came out, another little boy and his father also published a book about his near-death experience in heaven in a book called *The Boy Who Came Back From Heaven: A Remarkable Account of Miracles, Angels, and Life Beyond This World*, which sold over a million copies. The thing is, two years later the boy’s mother admitted that the story was made up. The boy, ironically named Alex Malarkey, later said, “I did not die. I did not go to Heaven. I said I went to Heaven because I thought it would get me attention.”

In today’s passage in 2 Corinthians, the Apostle Paul shares the story of his trip to heaven. But unlike the heaven tourism books, Paul is reluctant to talk about it and gives us virtually no details. He is continuing is

boasting, trying to get the Corinthian Christians to see the problem with the so-called super apostles. They were claiming all kinds of superior credentials, including apparently that they’d had supernatural ecstatic experiences of heaven.

So Paul describes his experience but since he can’t stand the boasting he tries to deflect the attention away from himself by talking about it in the third person. He says, “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.” Lots of people over the years have tried to use these short verses to build all kinds of ideas of what heaven is like. Or worse, they have used them to insist that to be an authentic Christian, you also need to have a similar experience. The truth is that’s the exact opposite of what this passage is teaching us.

Most likely what Paul is referring to is what he also describes in Galatians 1. After the resurrected and ascended Jesus appeared to Paul on the road to Damascus, Paul had an experience where he was taught directly by Jesus. In Galatians 1 Paul says, “the gospel that was preached by me is not man’s gospel. For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.” He goes on, “when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone; nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia, and returned again to Damascus.” In other words, Paul had a vision, a revelation from God. He says he doesn’t really know if that was literally in his body or if it was just a vision, and he says that more importantly it doesn’t matter. That’s God’s business.

The “third heaven” merely refers to what we would call heaven today. In the ancient

understanding, the first heaven was the sky, the second heaven was where the stars were, and the third heaven was where God is. The word “paradise” is another way of saying that as well.

But Paul wants to make clear that his experience is not something for him to share. It was intended for him only. He says he “heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter.” He means that what God told him was not to be shared. As we’ve seen by all of these heaven tourism books, having that kind of experience could tempt you to exploit the experience out of pride or greed or both.

Paul says that to keep him from getting conceited about it that God allowed him to have “a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me.” The Greek word translated as thorn is not so much like a thorn on a rose bush. It actually means a stake. Over the years lots of people have said what they think the thorn was, from malaria to eye problems to difficult people. We have no way of knowing what it was and that’s probably on purpose. You and I are more likely to see ourselves in this passage if the problem is left rather vague. Paul is trying to say, though, that whatever it is was very painful and probably very embarrassing.

He says three times he pleaded with the Lord that he would take it away. Some scholars suggest that this doesn’t mean he only prayed three times but that it indicates significant prayer. When we hear that he pleaded with God three times to take it away, we hear echoes of Jesus praying three times in the Garden of Gethsemane that the Father would take away his crucifixion.

Chances are, like Paul, there is something in your life that you regularly ask God to fix. Maybe it’s a life-changing illness. Maybe you’re struggling in your career or in your marriage or in your relationships with your family. Whatever it is you have begged God to change the situation and so far it seems as though He has not answered your prayer. It seems as though God is far away. Many of us struggle

with that. You may have heard that Mother Teresa struggled for years feeling that God was distant.

God does answer your prayers, though, just as he answered Paul’s prayers. Instead of taking away the thorn in the flesh, God told Paul, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Instead of taking away your pain, Jesus meets you there and bears it with you. He gives you the strength to bear it because our weakness is where we meet Jesus.

“My grace is sufficient for you.” What God means is that HE is sufficient for us. We don’t need to go looking anywhere else for God. His Word, the Bible, is sufficient for us. Jesus is sufficient for us. The truth is that there’s not more. Anyone who tries to tell you that you need more than what Scripture can provide is a false apostle. In response to *Heaven is Real*, John MacArthur said, “His stories of heaven are full of fanciful features and peculiar details that bear all the earmarks of a child’s vivid imagination. There’s nothing transcendent or even particularly enlightening about Colton’s description of heaven. In fact, it is completely devoid of the breathtaking glory featured in every biblical description of the heavenly realm.” We already know that heaven is real because Jesus told us. And we know what heaven is like. We will be in the presence of Jesus all the time.

Until then we are left with this paradox of faith. God’s power is “made perfect in weakness.” Made perfect here doesn’t mean flawless, although it is. It means that it is accomplished. God’s power is complete in our weakness. Paul says, “Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weakness, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.” The word “rest upon” is from the same word used to describe the Tabernacle in the Old Testament. It’s the same word used in John 1 where it says that Word became flesh and “dwelt” among us.

When you and I gladly bring our weaknesses to Jesus, he moves in. That’s where

he chooses to dwell. When you learn to accept your weaknesses, not trying to hide them, especially not trying to hide them from God, then you will experience a much closer relationship with Christ. And that will change your life forever. As verse 10 says, “For the sake of Christ, then, I am *content* with weaknesses,

insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities.” Are you content? Have you learned to *delight* in your weaknesses? I know it seems backward. But that’s the key to unlocking God’s power in your life, in your family, and in your church. For when we are weak, then we are strong. May it be so.

*Amen.*