

WHO IS SUFFICIENT?

by Ray C. Stedman

Today we begin what I think is one of the greatest passages in the New Testament. It is found in Second Corinthians, beginning in Chapter 2. Here is the clearest explanation in all the Word of God of the secret of the Apostle Paul's phenomenal ministry. It runs from Chapter 2, Verse 12, through Chapters 3, 4, 5, and 6, and ends with Verse 2 of Chapter 7.

I have treated this in my book, *Authentic Christianity*, because it has meant so much in my own life, and I have seen its impact in the lives of many others. It is such a splendid example of what genuine, true, authentic Christianity is. Yet, strangely enough, this great passage is a parenthesis in this Second Corinthian epistle; it is a digression on the apostle's part.

Paul had been speaking to the Corinthians about his pressures, and his problems, and the problems in Corinth. (He was waiting in Macedonia for Titus to return with news of what was happening in the church at Corinth.) He was feeling great disturbance of mind, as we will see in a moment, and out of that there grew this magnificent description of the power by which he labored and lived. It comes in almost as a spontaneous outburst from the apostle's heart to counteract the sense of failure and despair which he was feeling in his ministry at the time.

We get this background in Verses 12 and 13 of Chapter 2:

When I came to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ, a door was opened for me in the Lord; but my mind could not rest because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I took leave of them and went on to Macedonia. {2 Cor 2:12-13 RSV}

Those brief words gather up a tremendous experience in Paul's life. He had gone to Troas from Ephesus, as he tells us here, to preach the gospel of Christ. This was his great joy everywhere. Wherever he went he knew he would find people sunk in despair, filled with darkness, their lives governed by superstition and fear, being hounded, haunted, and hurt by all they were going through -- people who, without realizing what they were doing, had fallen into terrible, hurtful things that were destroying them. It was Paul's great joy to come with the good news of Jesus Christ, the one who understood the hurts of men, the deliverer, the healer of hurts, the one who had the power to touch human lives and transform them. Paul longed to preach the gospel, as he tells us, in all the earth if he could, because it was such a tremendous thing to see the power of God let loose among men to set them free.

So he came into the city of Troas for that purpose, and, as he tells us here, a great door was opened for him by the Lord; that is, there was a responsiveness to his message and great opportunity to get it out. Hundreds, even thousands of people, perhaps, gathered in the marketplaces, or wherever they could, to hear the word of the apostle. A church was already there; and the city was stirred as Paul came and had this great opportunity to preach. Yet, as he tells us here, he was unable to take advantage of it. His heart was so troubled, his spirit so anxious for news of what was happening in Corinth, that he could not minister. He was restless of spirit, and troubled of heart; and he had to leave.

I think he could see, as he was waiting there in those weeks and months, that, perhaps, all his labors in Corinth were about to fall apart. He must have been gripped by the great sense of personal failure that, in the visits he had made to Corinth, in the letters he had written to them, there was no way, seemingly, to work out this terrible problem that was eating at the life of this church and threatening to destroy the work he had done. In the midst of that sense of failure and pressure and anxiety he was given this great opportunity, but he could not lay hold of it. He left Troas and went up into Macedonia instead, hoping to find Titus there and find some relief for his troubled mind.

Now I do not know if any of you have ever felt that way or not, but I have. I know what it means to be called on to preach and teach the Word of God at times when my heart was so filled with anxiety and distress that I did not know whether I could open my mouth or not. So I understand what Paul felt, and I feel many of you do too, as he so honestly shares this with us. Yet the next verse is astounding:

But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumph, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. {2 Cor 2:14 RSV}

Many of you know that that is my favorite verse in all the Scripture. What an outstanding cry of grateful thanksgiving for a powerful and effective ministry! And it stands right next to the verse in which he is confessing his failure and his weakness, his frustration and his despair.

Now that is amazing, isn't it? Verses 14-16 give us a cry of grateful thanksgiving from the apostle's heart; Verse 17 is a description from his own lips of his significant and effective ministry and yet they stand side by side with this admission of his frustration.

Why this sudden reversal? Humanly speaking, the apostle's circumstances were dreary and dark and without encouragement. But spiritually, he says, on the basis of an understanding to which he had come to of how God works, he knew that the circumstances were actually bright and glowing with great possibilities, and he was rejoicing. He calls it, "always led in triumph in Christ."

I think the Bible scholars are right when they say that Paul is thinking here, quite evidently, about the Roman Triumphs. It was a custom in the Roman Empire, when a conquering general returned from a campaign over one of the enemies of Rome, if he had fought a hard campaign and had thoroughly overcome the enemy, subduing the threat to Rome, that the Senate would meet and grant him a Triumph. This would be equivalent to what we would call a "ticker tape parade," such as New York City gives to honor a triumphant person, when he is showered with ticker tape and acclamation. In the Roman Triumphs, the conquering general would ride through the streets of Rome in his chariot, preceded by numbers of priests swinging pots of fragrant incense. Behind him would come the captives he had taken, being led to their execution in chains; then there would come the generals of his army, the captains and the commanders of his forces. The streets would be filled with people shouting acclamations.

Now that is what Paul says was going on at the same time that he was feeling depressed, lonely, frustrated and discouraged in Macedonia. Is that not amazing, that he would put those two things in juxtaposition?

He further describes it as marked by a spreading forth of the fragrance of Christ; the beautiful character of Jesus was becoming evident through this pressure on him. Verses 15-16:

For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things? {2 Cor 2:15-16 RSV}

In the Roman Triumph, to the prisoners in chains following the conquering general's chariot, the fragrance of the incense was an odor of death, but to those who were part of the army, and to the citizens of Rome who had been spared the threat to the city, that fragrance was a fragrance unto life. Paul applies that to himself. He says that, as he goes about preaching this good news of Jesus Christ, the fact that Jesus is alive and can free men and deliver them from their inner torments and pressures, that this was everywhere a fragrance to God of the life of his Son. Wherever Paul went, God could smell the sweetness and beauty of Jesus in what Paul was doing.

But, more than that, it was a fragrance of Christ to men.

Ron Ritchie was telling me just this last week of a funeral service he conducted a week or so ago of a man who had received the Lord not long before his accidental death. There was one small group there which was very upset by what Ron was saying about the freedom and the new life in Christ. They stood there, sullen and angry; and they wrote him letters about it afterwards. To them that service was a fragrance of death unto death;

they did not like it. But others were rejoicing in the hope and the freedom that Christ had given this man, despite a very hurting life. To them that message was a fragrance of life unto life. At that point we are always dealing with blank, stark reality.

This is what Paul is talking about. Wherever he went, he said, people were either helped on to freedom and life in Christ, or they were angered, their opposition hardened, and they were driven further unto death. But nobody took him for granted. He made an impact wherever he went. Paul describes his own ministry in those terms.

What does this all mean?

Well, I think it means that the world was unimpressed by the Apostle Paul. As this bandy-legged, bald-headed, hook-nosed little Jew traveled around the Roman Empire, preaching this great message, he was never received by the Chamber of Commerce; no reporters followed him around, giving verbatim reports of all that he was saying. Even in his own eyes he was not doing anything tremendous. He himself was feeling, as he says, frustrated and restless; a great sense of failure gripped him. But what he says was actually happening, despite this, was that he knew that because his ministry did not rest upon his feeble efforts to do something for God, but on his expectation that God was going to do something through him, that he was at the very moment of his frustration being led in triumph by Jesus Christ. A great, widespread testimony of the fragrance of Jesus Christ was going out. People were being set free, and his ministry was a success. And so he cries from this eternal gratitude of his heart, "Thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumph."

I want you to know that if I did not believe in that great principle I would resign from the pastorate tomorrow morning.

I have just had the privilege, along with Ron Ritchie and John Fischer, of spending a week on the campus of Seattle Pacific University. We had meetings in the evening and in the morning; and it was my responsibility to have the chapel hours in the morning. For four days I had the privilege of teaching the Word of God to 2,400 college students who sat there very, very quiet and responsive, listening to everything I was saying. It was a tremendous opportunity, but I want you to know that every morning I spoke from a very heavy heart. I could bear witness, as Paul does in Romans 9, that "my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart," {Rom 9:2 RSV}. The reason was because my second daughter, who has for eight years now been struggling with her faith, is wandering farther and farther away. Despite our daily prayers, rather than drawing closer, she seems to be going further into hurtful things so that her family is being terribly hurt. You cannot face something like that without being aware, as a parent, that you may have contributed a great deal to the reasons for it. The enemy is quick to assault you, to accuse you. So I was ministering all last week with a very heavy heart, out of deep, personal anguish. The only thing that enabled me to keep going was that I have confidence in what Paul is saying here that, despite the personal frustration and darkness that I was going through, I was also being led in triumph by Jesus Christ; and out of my personal weakness would come a great manifestation of the strength of our Lord and the spreading of the fragrance of Christ.

This is what is properly called the "victorious Christian life." You hear a lot about that today, and much of it is unbiblical, in my judgment. There are strange ideas of what the "victorious life" consists of:

- Some people see it as a kind of a Disneyland. Many of you have had the experience of going through the Pirates of the Caribbean in Disneyland when you get aboard a boat and go through a tunnel. Immediately you are assaulted by enemies; strange figures leap out of the darkness at you, brandishing huge knives and swords; pistols are discharged right in your face, cannons fire and cannonballs splash on either side of your boat, and it looks like your life is in horrible danger. But you sit there, quietly unmoved, because you know that you are going to be led safely through all this, and nothing is ever going to get to you.

There are a lot of people who have that view of the Christian life. They think, because they are Christians, because they happen to now be a child of God, a son of the King, they are going to be protected and kept from every single pressure and danger of life, and nothing is ever going to get to

them. And they quote many verses to support that view. Well, if that is the view of the "victorious life," then I want you to know that Paul did not know anything about it, because he went through terrible testings and great times of pressure. He will describe them for us in this very letter. They are unbelievable in their intensity and in their power to wrack and ruin in his life. Yet he could cry out with great confidence and a triumphant spirit that rings throughout this whole passage, because he knew, according to the great principle which he had learned through much pain and anguish, that God was carrying out his purposes through the very weakness he was going through.

- Some people see the "victorious life" as a kind of a constant, visible demonstration of tremendous power so that no obstacle can stand in their way. They see it much like General Patton slashing his way across the countries of Europe in World War II, smashing all obstacles in his path, visibly triumphant all the way into Germany. They expect that. They expect to "feel" powerful, and to see the power of God let loose in such triumphant ways that all the obstacles are visibly crushed. But again, if that is what it is, Paul did not know anything about it.

If we can judge from his life, instead, the "victorious Christian life" is a feeling of weakness, with only brief glimpses of success, seemingly going from one battle to another, from one conflict to another without ceasing, with little sense of personal triumph at the moment. And yet that triumph is happening, and that is what Paul is singing about here. His life was making powerful impact.

It is clearly evident to us who live in this 20th century that, apart from our Lord himself, probably no other human being ever has made such a fantastic impression on human history as the Apostle Paul. Great cities in the world today are named for him: The capital of Minnesota, the largest city in Brazil. These are testimonies to the effect this man has had upon the world, even twenty centuries later. Why? Well, he tells us. It is because he learned a secret that many Christians seemingly forget today, but it is the secret of the impact of this mighty life.

Listen to how he describes his ministry in this brief summary in Verse 17:

For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God's word; but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ. {2 Cor 2:17 RSV}

Notice the contrast there. "We are not like a lot of people," he says, "who in this 1st century are going around finding attractive little trinkets in the Word of God and peddling them like street salesmen, hawkers, making a good living over people's curiosity about some of the subjects the Word of God treats." They were doing that in that day, and they are doing it today in the 20th century. The world today is full of religious racketeers who are doing exactly what Paul called here, "peddling God's word." Turn on the television, pick up a magazine, listen to the radio; you hear them on every side. They peddle tongues, or healing, or prophecy, or whatever it may be. Not that these things do not have validity in themselves, they do, but these racketeers take that which is peripheral and secondary and make it central. Everything gathers about it, and that is all they write about and all they talk about and all they think about. They are hawking it as salesmen would any product in the economic world today. Paul says, "We are not like that."

There is another form of it today which I think was also prevalent in his day. Certain people pose as Bible scholars, they write learned discussions about various aspects and passages of Scripture, and command high salaries for dispensing theological junk. It is going on all over the world, and it is going on right here in the Bay Area. I do not mean to brand the faculty of Seattle Pacific by that description at all, but when Ron Ritchie and John Fischer and I were there we had occasion to speak to them and we simply took the opportunity to remind them, as brothers in Christ, of the hunger we found in the student body for closeness of relationship with adult leaders on the faculty. We reminded them of the responsibility they have to minister as shepherds to these young people who are spending four years on their campus, a responsibility that some, at least, among them had already shoved aside or were easily forgetting. In Ron's characteristic way he spoke to them, paraphrasing with great impact a passage from Luke 17, where Jesus said, in effect, "Look, if you are going to mess with God's children you had better consider the possibility of committing suicide first." And that sobered those men and women, as it ought to sober us. Paul has nothing to do with this kind of a superficial, shallow approach to the Word of God.

His ministry, as he describes it, is four-fold: He is first, sincere, that is, he practices what he preaches; he believes what he is saying. He does not preach cream and live skim milk. He is doing what he declares. And, second, his ministry is purposeful. "We are commissioned by God," he says. "We are not just sent into this world to enjoy ourselves and try and get through it and retire in a comfortable way. We have a goal to accomplish. We have been sent to do something." He declares in Colossians what it is: "that we may present every man mature in Christ. For this I toil, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, striving with all the energy which he mightily inspires within me," {cf, Col 1:28-29}. That is his goal, and he never forgot it.

That ought to be the goal of every Christian, that we help one another grow up and become mature individuals, emotionally, spiritually, and in every way to forget our childish little ways, to turn away from that and grow up and be men and women in Christ.

And finally, he did so "in Christ." He says, "We speak in Christ." Later on he calls himself "an ambassador for Christ, as though God did beseech you in Christ's stead be ye reconciled to God," {2 Cor 5:20 KJV}. He spoke with authority because he came as a representative of God himself to deliver a message the world desperately needed to hear.

It is hopeless to look to secular leadership to get us out of the mess we are in. If the church is not going to say to the world what God has sent it to say, there is no hope for this country or any other country today. It is truth we need. It is light in our darkness we need. That is what every one of us has been commissioned by God to declare the light in the midst of the darkness. That is what Paul is talking about, not out to make a quick, soft living, raking in millions of dollars by hawking some attractive trinket in the Word of God, but proclaiming the truth of God so that people are truly delivered and set free.

What a ministry that was!

No wonder in the midst of it he raises this question, "Who is sufficient for these things?"

When you think of what we are sent to do, I am sure that is a question that grips your heart. It does mine.

Paul is going to answer that question in the third chapter, and it would not hurt if you read ahead a little bit and found out what the answer is. (We will come to it next week.) But he raises the question because it is so obvious that no human resource is capable of this.

Who can do this? What school can you graduate from will give you this capability? What course can you take? What human leader can you follow who will teach you how to function in these realms and on these terms so that people are actually set free? "Who is sufficient for these things?"

Jesus himself raised the question with his disciples. On one occasion he turned to the twelve and said to them, "Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink and to be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" {cf, Matt 20:22 KJV}. In their ignorant futility they said, "Yes, sure, we are able," as many of us have unthinkingly said. But Jesus' words are very solemn. He said, "You shall drink indeed of my cup, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with," {cf, Matt 20:23}. He meant by that that there would be frustration, there would be fear, there would be loneliness and death in your experience if you are going to see the power of God released in your life.

The victorious Christian life is not one of continual victory in the sense of overcoming all obstacles and feeling triumphant as you go. No! No! It is one of anguish of heart at times, of deep inner doubts, of fighting with frustrations without and fears within. It is one of being opposed oftentimes, yet confident that the God who is within you is able to work his work and do his will, that out of the fear, the frustration, and the failure is coming triumph and victory and the fragrance of Jesus Christ.

Have you come to that?

That is what is going to turn and change this world around us.

God grant we will understand this as we go through this passage together.

Prayer

Lord, we thank you for this compelling word from the lips of the great apostle. We thank you that, though twenty centuries have rolled away since those days, you have not changed, nor has the world changed, nor have we; that your power is as manifest and as powerful today as ever, and you can handle this age as well as you did any age, or any place, or time. Thank you for the privilege of being called into a ministry like this that does not rest upon our resources, our personalities, our money, our time, or anything else but the greatness of our God. We thank you, Lord, that we may be your instruments in this day; and pray that we might understand this anew and afresh. In the name of Jesus, our Lord, Amen.

OUTLINE OF 2 CORINTHIANS 2:12-17

1. Triumph out of Pressure, 12-13
 - A. The pressure, 12-13
 1. A proper motive
 2. A great opportunity
 3. A troubled mind
 4. A restless spirit
 - B. The triumph, 14-17
 1. A continually grateful heart
 - a. For unending victory
 - b. For widespread fragrance
 - (1) To God
 - (2) To men
 - (a) Some to death
 - (b) Some to life
2. A wonderfully effective ministry, 17
 - a. Not as a peddler
 - b. But as an ambassador.
 - (1) Sincere
 - (2) Purposeful
 - (3) Transparent
 - (4) Authoritative

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