

# **Way Truth Life: A Journey of Grace**

## *Sufficient Grace*

2 Corinthians 12:2-10

- Grace that carries.

- Grace that is enough.

- Grace that holds on.

- Grace that produces.

- Grace to relinquish.

- Grace of lament.

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## Way Truth Life: A Journey of Grace<sup>1</sup> Sufficient Grace

Aren't you glad that, once you responded to God's seeking grace and you experienced God's saving grace and his sanctifying and sustaining grace, that life was suddenly super easy, and you never had difficulties anymore?

What...you're telling me that's not your experience? Hmmm...mine neither.

Folks, we have good, godly people in our church right now who have walked and are walking through incredibly difficult seasons. A family with college kids whose dad died. A Grandfather who lost his grandson and his wife in the same year, and his sons' families dealing with the losses of their child and mom. Young couples who have suffered the loss of their babies through miscarriages. People who had been married for decades and their spouse passed away. A person who has been battling cancer and facing treatments for years now. Others who fought cancer. Others whose spouses left them. Others who lost their jobs through no fault of their own. But in every one of those instances that I just mentioned, if you were to ask them, I know for a fact they would tell you that they are experiencing God's presence, his strength, and his peace. As our author says, "Have you ever wondered why those who appear to have an easy life can seem so distant from God, while those who are going through the deepest waters and dealing with the greatest personal struggles often sense the intimate nearness of God? At first glance, both observations appear counterintuitive. It stands to reason that those with fewer problems would be happier and surrounded by greater peace than those enduring profound suffering, yet the opposite is often true. How do you explain such a paradox?"<sup>2</sup>

Jesus told us to pray for God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven, and just the fact that we have to pray for that means it isn't happening right now. Not everything that happens in this world is God's will. To say that God causes suffering is to claim that God causes evil, and that is the same thing as maligning God's character. The third commandment tells us not to take God's name in vain, and we think that means we shouldn't include God's name when we use swear words. That's true, but that's not all it means. It has more to do with misrepresenting God in this world. It is a very serious thing to say that anything evil is from God or to say that anything from God is evil.

So let me help clear that up a little bit: (in the words of our author again), "even though not everything that happens is God's will, yet because our God is all-powerful and all-loving, God *has* a will in everything, especially when as it relates to those God claims as his own and who abide in Christ."<sup>3</sup> One of God's specialties is taking things that were meant for evil

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<sup>1</sup> This series borrows heavily from, and is indebted to:

- David A. Busic, *Way, Truth, Life: Discipleship as a Journey of Grace* (The Foundry Publishing, KC, MO 2021)

<sup>2</sup> Busic, 139-140

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 140

and turning them into good things in people's lives. I don't know if you remember the story of Joseph in the Old Testament, but Joseph was the baby of the family and his father's favorite. His eleven jealous brothers tried to get rid of him by beating him up and leaving him for dead. But Joseph ended up in slavery in Egypt, rising through the ranks to become a person of such influence that, when a drought struck the land, he was able to save the lives of his father and brothers and family and estate. Then Joseph spoke to his brothers and described what God is so good at, he said:

"You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives." (Genesis 50:20, nrsv)

In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul writes:

"We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." (Romans 8:28, niv)

Joseph didn't say that God *caused* his brothers to sell him into slavery; he said that God wouldn't let their evil intentions have the last word. Paul didn't say that God *causes* bad things to happen to people; he said that God is faithful to work in all circumstances, good and bad, and will take what seems to be destructive and broken and make it healing and something holy.

These Scriptures, along with a whole bunch of others in the Bible, explain what we said earlier – why those believers who are going through the greatest suffering are also the ones who experience the greatest peace.

There's something powerful that happens in the life of the fully surrendered disciple of Jesus who, along the journey of grace, goes through difficult and demanding situations: They experience God's sufficient grace in their weakness that sustains them and provides what they need in their greatest struggles. Today, on Palm Sunday, we are going to conclude our series by looking at God's sufficient grace – that his grace is enough for us no matter what we are going through, especially when we are going through the worst.

The Apostle Paul wrote about sufficient grace in his second letter to the Christians in the city of Corinth. I'd like to read that passage for us, and then we'll unpack it, and then we'll apply it. Okay? Would you help me honor God's Word by standing with me as I read it to us? Thank you.

I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know—God knows. And I know that this man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows— was caught up to paradise and heard inexpressible things, things that no one is permitted to tell. I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses. Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool, because I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain, so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say, or because of these surpassingly great revelations. Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Corinthians 12:2-10, niv)

Friends, this is the Word of God for the people of God! Thanks be to God! Thank you for standing; you can have a seat.

Okay, that passage might seem a little strange so let me explain what Paul is saying so that we can understand what it means for our journey of grace. You might want to keep your Bibles or your Bible app open as we go through it; it will make it easier for you to follow along.

So the church in Corinth was foolishly quick to follow false prophets who were making all kinds of grandiose claims about themselves, about how enlightened they were and telling stories about all these supposed spiritually ecstatic experiences that they'd had. So Paul counters that by first "bragging" about how much he's suffered for their sakes. He was well on his way to a rich and powerful position in the world of Jewish religious leadership, which he gave up to follow Jesus and to share the Good News of God's love with the Gentiles – people who the Jews hated but that Jesus died for. So Paul is being a bit sarcastic, but he's also pointing out that what makes a great Christian is not how many mystical experiences you have or how biblically smart you think you are – it's about how much you are willing to give up and endure for the sake of Christ and others. But to continue along their faulty line of thinking, Paul then actually shares his own spiritual experiences, in order to show that those are not what really matters. So when Paul says, "I know a man..." he's talking about himself, in a way that is not bragging but also making it clear that it's him. When he says it was 14 years ago, he is pointing out that this is the first time he's talked about this experience, even though he could have been bragging about this for fourteen years. Again, he's saying that these supernatural experiences are *not* the big deal you should be excited about.

Then, in verses 2-4 Paul gives two parallel descriptions of one heavenly journey or vision that he had. He says, "I don't know if I was really there physically, or if I was there only spiritually, but either way, I was there." Paul says that God knows which one it was, but it doesn't matter to Paul. Either way it was real. When he says he was taken up into the "third heaven," Paul is not saying that there are levels of heaven; he's using "three" as a way to say that he was *fully* in God's heavenly presence. You might say that level one is the clouds, level two is the stars, and level three is heavenly places. But there are no levels of heaven. Got that? And notice Paul's humility – he doesn't give us any details of what it was like, and he doesn't tell us anything about what happened. He just says, "God took me there one time." Again – Paul is saying that being in heaven isn't the great thing; being on earth and serving Jesus – *that's* the great thing!

But if Paul were tempted to begin to boast or think he was some sort of super spiritual saint because he had this vision in God's presence, he points out that he's fully tethered to earth by the suffering he goes through. Then he starts to write about one particular issue or struggle or problem that he had.

Now, we don't know exactly what it was that Paul was referring to, but whatever it was, it

caused severe pain and suffering, so much so that Paul pleaded with God three times – again meaning *totally* pleading. Remember, Jesus prayed three times in the garden of Gethsemane, begging God to find some other way than for Jesus to have to go to the cross for us. After three times, Jesus had completely prayed about it and had gotten his answer. He was done asking for that. Same here with Paul. But think about it – whatever it was that Paul suffered with, it had to be really bad for him to plead with God to remove it. Paul had been through all kinds of stuff in order to tell people about Jesus: torture, persecution, prison, nakedness, poverty, sickness, blindness, shipwrecks, poisonous snake bites, and never complained about it once. In fact, he willingly went through those things. So whatever *this* was, it had to be bad. There’s been a lot of speculation down through the ages of what this “thorn in the flesh” might have been, but Paul says Satan was the source of it, so again, it had to be bad. The word that we translate as “thorn” was commonly used to describe a stake – like a very sharp pole that people were impaled on. The word for “torment” means to be repeatedly punched in the face, so again – extreme physical impairment or torment. He says it’s a thorn in his flesh, and he’s talking about his physical body. For centuries it was believed that Paul was referring to severe headaches – migraines that are so debilitating that he would get sick and not even be able to see. Some scholars have said that it was epilepsy or blindness or stomach disorders, others have said it was spiritual or psychological trials, some have said it was temptations, but most believe it was some sort of severe physical ailment that brought on extreme pain and psychological distress.

You know what? I’m glad Paul didn’t tell us specifically what it was. Let me put it this way: he left it blank so you could plug in your most severe problem. Cancer? Stick it in there. Did your husband or wife or mom or dad or child die? Plug it in there. Migraines? There you go. Diverticulitis? Back pain? Heartache? Grief? It fits in there perfectly. *The point of this passage is not the pain; the point of the passage is the sufficiency of God’s grace in everything that we struggle with, everything that is out of our control, everything that we wish we could change but we can’t.* God’s grace is ENOUGH. By all means pray about it; pray about it until you feel you’ve finally finished praying about it. But as you pray and when you are done praying, you’ve got all of God’s grace and love for you.

Most of you know that seven and a half years ago I was in a car accident coming down the mountain when a motorcycle that was speeding lost control coming around the corner and came into my lane. The driver laid his bike down right in front of my car, becoming a ramp that sent my car airborne, landing upside down, spinning and then rolling several times down the embankment. My head was smashed against the roof of the car and the impact split my scalp open, and the spinning and rolling thrashed me around. When it was all said and done, I was taken to the ER, stapled up and sent home, and I remember very little for the next three months. The accident has left me with chronic headaches, often very severe. I’ve been to the pain clinic and had multiple steroid shots, I’ve had the nerves in my neck burned twice, been to massage therapy, been on different drugs that helped with the pain but made my brain cloudy. I quit those because I’d rather be clear headed and in pain than pain free and foggy. I have to wear these prismatic glasses because I have double vision. I’ve been to almost a half-dozen different physical therapists. I finally found one that is helping me to strengthen and stretch to give my nerves some relief, but I have to go in once to twice a week every week. I have a 45-minute regimen of stretching for my neck that I

have to do *every morning* to make the headaches mostly manageable. I have to spend 30-45 minutes on the elliptical every morning to get the blood flowing and loosen up my neck and shoulders. Every. Day. You don't think I've prayed about this? Many of you are still praying with me and for me. I'm not done praying about it. I continue to pursue whatever avenues of relief that might be out there. But I'm learning that there is grace for me that is greater than the pain. My goodness – if Leonard Lydin experienced God's grace in his situation, then I sure can in mine. Many of you don't know Leonard. He passed away about eleven or twelve years ago. But you know Jan Bass. And you know Maxine Lydin. And many of you knew Leonard. Ask them about him. I don't know how he did what he did. I've got no room to complain.

For a while, I was meeting with a psychiatrist who was helping me learn how to meditate in order to gain mental strength over the physical pain. Finally in one session, she asked me how I keep from being buried by the pain. I told her: "It's only pain; it's not going to last forever. It's only temporary. How long do I have in this life? Maybe I'll get to live to 75 or 80 or 90 – if I'm fortunate? Then I'll get to be with Jesus and the pain will be gone. I can live with it for that long." She said, "I've never heard anyone talk about pain that way before." (And she is a pain psychologist! That's all she helps people with all day!). But I said, "I know God loves me, I experience his love for me, and his grace is *sufficient* for me. His grace can get me through anything. Besides, it makes me depend on him, and gives him more room to work in my life." I'm trying to learn from Paul.

So let's talk about what God's all-sufficient grace does for us. This is what we learn from Paul's passage on pain. Think about your current or worst hardship, trial, or painful experience. Plug it into this conversation and see that God gives us a...

### **Grace that *carries*.**

Our author says that "Sufficient grace is the Lord's way of saying, *when you come to the end of your human strength, I will give you my supernatural strength. When your energy runs out, my energy will be made alive in you. When you cannot go any farther, I will pick you up and carry you. Rest in my arms for a while.*

I think we're all familiar with that modern poem that talks about a person having a dream that they were walking along the beach with Jesus, and across the sky flashed scenes from his life, and for each scene he noticed two sets of footprints in the sand – one belonging to him, and one set belonging to Jesus who was walking alongside him. But when the last scene had finished, he looked back and noticed that during the particularly difficult times when he was at his lowest or saddest, there was only one set of footprints. So he asked Jesus why he had abandoned the man to be alone when he needed him most? And Jesus said, "My precious, precious child, I love you, and I would never leave you. During your times of trial and suffering, when you see only one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you."

That might be an overused, overly cheesy modern poem, but it is accurate. The sufficient grace of God means that he carries us when we don't think we can take another step. It's a poem that I've heard over and over again in my years of ministry as I've watched people go

through incredibly difficult times, and yet they say things like, “Pastor, I have a real sense of peace.” Or, “I don’t know how I’m getting through this, but I am.”

And you know, God gives us exactly what we need; he gives us...

### **Grace that is *enough*.**

Most of us are familiar with the story of the manna in the wilderness: when God’s people had been set free from slavery in Egypt and they were in the desert with nothing to eat, God provided this miracle bread that would show up every morning on the desert floor. There was more than enough for them to eat, but it would only last a day. If they took more than they needed for that day, it would rot. If they ate yesterday’s manna, they’d get sick. What they got was just what they needed for that day. The same is true for God’s sufficient grace. God doesn’t give us what we need for tomorrow; he gives us what we need for today. The grace we received yesterday won’t help us today, but even if it did, we wouldn’t need it. That’s why Paul could be content in his weakness; because God provided what he needed for that day, that moment.

### **Grace that *holds on*.**

There’s a story of a pastor in Pennsylvania who saw a man after church with a bulldog pin on his jacket lapel. The pastor didn’t know that the man worked for a trucking company whose business logo was a bulldog, so he asked the man, “What does the bulldog symbolize?” With a twinkle in his eye the man answered, “Pastor, the bulldog symbolizes the tenacity with which I hold onto Jesus Christ.” The pastor said, “That’s a great symbol, but it’s bad theology.” The man was surprised and said, “What do you mean?” The pastor said, “It should never stand for the tenacity with which you hold onto Jesus Christ. It should stand for the tenacity with which Jesus Christ holds onto you.” That’s good theology. Remember, Jesus told his disciples and us in John 10:28-30 that no one can take us out of Jesus’ hand.

Many of you remember Pastor Arden. He was on our pastoral team and called on folks in the hospitals. He was in his nineties when he died just as people were figuring out what Covid was. I’m sure he had it. But he also had heart issues, having suffered heart attacks. One time after a heart attack I visited him in the hospital. He was a youngster at the time – in his eighties. But he told about what happened when they were doing the dye to do an angiogram. He was on the table when the dye put him in distress, and he had a full-blown heart attack. He said that he was in such severe pain that he couldn’t speak or even breath. He couldn’t even think clearly to even pray. All he could muster the strength to do was think, “Jesus help!” He was sure he was dying at that time. But then he said that there was this incredible peace that came over him because he knew that Jesus was holding on to him, and no matter what, it was going to be okay.

Not all of us have those experiences, but we do have each other. I remember when I was a youth pastor, working with a young lady whose heart was broken from all those years on her birthday, when she had been promised in a letter by her divorced father that he would

come see her and bring her a present. And every year, without fail, as she waited by the window, he never came. I told her that God loves her, and she said, "I know that, but sometimes I need Jesus with skin on." I watched our church be that for her. Whether we have those moments like Pastor Arden described or not, all of us, church, are Jesus with skin on. We can be a means of God's grace to one another as we hold on to each other in the ways we pray, love, encourage, help, and serve each other. Sufficient grace does not let us go.

Remember that Paul said in Romans 8:28 that God works all things together for good for those who love God and are called according to his purposes? What Paul learned was that it is...

### **Grace that *produces*.**

God, in his sufficient grace, during those difficult times, will actually use those times as yet another opportunity to help us become like Christ. In Romans 5:3-5, Paul wrote:

"We also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us." (Romans 5:3-5, niv)

Suffering produces perseverance or endurance, which produces character, which gives us hope. And so we don't have to be ashamed because God has poured out his love, like a pitcher filling a glass to overflowing with his love in our hearts through the Holy Spirit, God's very own presence in us. Remember I said earlier that not everything that happens to us is God's will, but God has a will in everything that happens to us. God won't let anything go to waste, but will use it all to help us become our very highest and best, like Christ in everything. The language that Paul uses describes how precious metal is heated to burn off the dross so that the gold or silver is pure.

Now, I confess that I sometimes whine about what I go through. Like all of us, I get a little down sometimes. And I admit it is easy to start counting my sorrows instead of my blessings. Whenever I start to do that, before long I start to think I'm a victim. Poor me.

I think all of us, after two years of Covid and things finally opening up, are still gasping for fresh air that isn't strained through a mask, but behind every breath is a weariness that we've still all got to deal with. And if we're not careful, we'll start to get mad, blame the government or somebody's government, and we'll start acting like victims.

I find it interesting that when Jesus died on the cross for us, after all that brutal torture that he endured for us, he prayed:

"Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." (Luke 23:46)

It is very similar to the prayer he prayed in the garden just a day before, that I mentioned earlier, when Jesus prayed:

"Nevertheless, not my will, but yours be done, Father." (Luke 22:42)

Here's the point: there is a huge difference between a life that is *taken* and a life that is



*given.* Jesus told us:

“No one can take my life from me. I sacrifice it voluntarily.” (John 10:18, nlt)

He gave up his life freely and willingly.

You see, sufficient grace means that God also gives us the...

### **Grace to *relinquish*.**

God gives us the grace to surrender to him, to submit ourselves to his higher and better purposes for our lives than our own. That’s why Paul said in Romans 8:28 that God works all things together for good *for those who love God and are called according to his purposes*. Jesus said that no one can take you out of his hand, but have you placed your life there? Have you fully submitted yourself to him? Are you giving your life, your sorrows, your pain, to God, or are you acting like it is being taken from you? When you think of your experience, you are either having something taken from you, or you are laying it down. One is a loss; the other is a surrender. We could either whine and say, “Something is being taken from me,” or we can surrender to God, trust him, and say, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit. I surrender myself to your plans and purposes. My life is not my own. I lay my life down because I belong to you, and I give my life up for love so that you can make it holy. I trust that your seeking, saving, sanctifying, sustaining, sufficient grace will be made perfect in me through my weaknesses.”

Listen folks: a global pandemic cannot dictate the purpose and meaning of our lives. The government doesn’t dictate the purpose and meaning of our lives. The bill of rights doesn’t dictate the purpose and meaning of our lives. Media and moguls and wars and destruction don’t get to dictate the purpose and meaning of our lives.

My pain does not dictate the purpose of my life. Pain is only temporary; my purpose and meaning lasts forever, and it is God in his grace through Jesus Christ my Lord.

His grace is sufficient for me, and his strength is made perfect in my weakness. Is his grace sufficient for you? There’s only one way to find out: relinquish your life to God.

This last year has been one of the most difficult for Shelly and me (besides the first few years of our son Brenden’s life, when God miraculously healed him. That’s another story for another time.). But in January of last year, Shelly’s dad died. My mom was in her third-year battling brain cancer, glioblastoma. One of the deadliest. It was a miracle she was alive, but it was taking a huge toll on her life and health and mental ability. Then a year ago this week, my dad had a stroke. What followed was a month and a half of me being his 24-hour caregiver, and I won’t go into the dirty details of that. They lived in Salem, Oregon. Within six weeks of dad’s stroke, we moved them from their home of 50 years to an assisted living place. Then it got worse. Mom and dad got covid (and the place never told me). Mom fell numerous times. She was in and out of the ER, one time waiting on a gurney in the hall for eight hours because she had covid and the hospital in Salem didn’t want to treat her or transport her. Another time she was locked in the ER room for three days while they tried to send her away to a memory facility somewhere in the state. I had to fight to get her out. Her cancer started growing again. Two more weeks of radiation

treatment. In a 100-day span last summer, I was in Salem almost 70 days, caring for them, working from there, driving back to preach, doing zoom meetings. Meanwhile, during that time, Shelly spent over a month in Arizona with her mom who had hip replacement surgery, and due to her mom's health issues, she did it with only a spinal block. She was awake for the whole thing. She got much, much worse before she got better.

Then we had to call hospice for my mom. I was there the night she died. Then her funeral a month later. Then we moved dad up here during Thanksgiving. Then dad spent two trips to the ER over the holidays, one of which resulted in being life flighted to Seattle for emergency surgery. Then five weeks in rehab. Shelly spent another month in Denver helping her siblings get her dad's house ready to sell. Shelly and I will have to do the same thing with my parents' house.

This in addition to our own health stuff. I'm just being honest with you guys. I keep wondering when I will have the privilege of grieving? And if so, how, and when will it happen?

The other day as I was praying about all that, I prayed this prayer: God, will grief replace your grace in me? Will grief be greater than grace? Or is there grace in grief?

Do you know what that prayer is? It is a prayer of lament. Sufficient grace is also the...

### **Grace of lament.**

This grace allows us to be honest with God. It doesn't mean that we have to pretend it doesn't hurt or act like we are happy. God gives us the grace to lament. Please know that I'm not telling you these things about our life because I'm whining; not at all. Just the opposite; in my honesty, I am testifying to the sufficient grace of God!

There are 150 Psalms in the book of Psalms – 150 prayers. Now, there are different types of Psalms – we studied those a couple years ago. There are Psalms of praise, thanksgiving, royal psalms and even what are called imprecatory psalms – prayers we pray when we are angry. But there are also lament prayers. Lament prayers raise two primary questions: “Why is this happening?” And “How long will this go on?” God not only allows these questions, he loves to hear them. It's interesting to note this: 70 percent of the psalms are pain prayers, not praise prayers. Prayers of lament. Seventy percent!

Lament isn't whining, it's not playing the victim. Lament is honesty before God that trusts in his nature and character and power; that he is a God who is present in, participating in, and attentive to the darkness, weakness, and suffering of life. Our author says that lament is utter dependence on and total abandonment to a God who may seem distant but is never absent.

People ask me how we are getting through these days. Usually, I don't really know; we just are. But looking back, I realize that the reason we are is because of God's sufficient grace. Sometimes that grace has been God with skin on – you, as you pray for us. The amazing team of pastors that have helped me and served you. The incredibly understanding and supportive leadership team that has given me permission to care for my parents. The grace of God that carried us, is always enough, holds on to us, and I believe is using this to make

us more like Jesus. We are relinquishing ourselves to God in even deeper ways, and he allows us to lament.

Has that been your experience? It can be.

*Prayer*

I think about Jesus on Palm Sunday. Walking resolutely into the mouth of the lion, knowing what was about to happen to him. Listening to the people's shallow shouts of praise that would turn to shouts of crucifixion. Jesus weeping over Jerusalem because they don't even realize what they are about to do to God. Do you think God's grace was sufficient for Jesus to go through that for us?

Then it is sufficient for you.

Let's sing.

Pastor Jason:

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all...Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it. (2 Corinthians 13:14, 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24)