

Sermon Draft

Text: 2 Corinthians 12:1–10

Sermon: Independence Day 2021

When asked, people from other countries typically remark that Americans are cocky, proud, and even arrogant. Considering our economic power and vast natural resources, which produce a high standard of living, it should not be a surprise to us that we are tempted to think so highly of our native land. Coupled with the natural barriers of the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans and our military power, our freedoms have been gifted very fertile conditions to grow prolifically.

We Americans are tempted to forget the main reason we have all that we enjoy, and that is God's grace. There is nothing biblical about our specific form of government, and there is nothing guaranteeing that this way of life here will continue indefinitely. It is quite tempting to think that our nation's place in the world's history is because we must be doing something right or we are pleasing to God for some reason.

Remember, God will do with this nation of ours what he alone chooses to do, regardless of which party is in the majority of our legislatures and regardless of which personality is in the office of president. Our country and our way of life stand by God's grace and by his grace alone!

This example of our nation's prosperity applies to our beloved synod, too. Her growth and expansion during the nineteenth and early to mid-twentieth centuries has now been replaced with decades of decline, with closing parishes and schools. Do each of these eras, the one of robust growth and the other of gradual decline, display God's ever-present grace? In other words, were the previous period of growth and our present period of decline both truly under God's grace, alone?

Regularly, we are led by Satan to believe our recent falloff in numbers should be analyzed by results-based measures. Were we not tempted to think it was our efforts that gave rise to the time of flourishing? Then is it not the same logic with which we are tempted when we are in a period of decline?

God's grace was not just present with us when we were growing; our Lord has been equally gracious to have allowed our church to suffer reduced worship attendance and church membership, which gives rise to the shuttering of parishes, and reduced enrollment, which prompts the closing of our schools.

In our text, Paul tells the Corinthians that he has been given a revelation of the life to come in heaven; what Paul saw would rival John's Revelation. Yet, throughout this second epistle, Paul struggles to be heard by the hardhearted members of the congregation. What a dichotomy! Stupendous revelations yet closed-minded congregants.

These internal struggles for Paul came to a climax in 2 Corinthians 12. Paul himself had been and was still the poster child of God's grace, but he had been given a trial, a temptation, a ***"thorn in his flesh,"*** a messenger of Satan. How would he be tempted to explain these problems? Could these difficulties even be attributed to grace from God?

In this world, only weak men submit to mistreatments, insults, and injustices. Strong men, on the other hand, violently resist such unfair experiences and relentlessly work to bring justice upon their enemies. Our calling, as God's baptized children, is to a seemingly radical life of worldly weakness, just as our Savior lived, and not to worldly strength.

If we listen to all the well-meaning talking heads reflecting over the Church and her message, we will be woefully misled down the path of principles and not down the lamp-led path of scriptural truth. Such false principles offer quick fixes to the very deep problem of the sinfulness of man. As we have seen in all the biblical saints, God's grace never ceases to work in their hearts even as they show forth in their actions their very intimate struggles with their own flesh.

So, it is in our lives and in the lives of our fellow church members. To what the world defines as strength, we oftentimes assent, leading us to despair of God's grace rather than being drawn to it for our true strength found in weakness.

Consider what Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 10:11–13: ***“Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction. . . . Therefore, let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall. No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.”***

These struggles to which Paul is referring are common to all sinful human beings and are being powerfully used by God to shape us in our weakness. Our loving Father is in control of them, and he desires to draw us closer to him and his mighty grace. Remember how God allowed Satan to tempt Job so that God would be glorified in Job’s weakness; this fragile servant was pushed to rely utterly on the powerful grace given him, received all by faith.

In fact, Paul says in this morning’s text that these trials are brought to finality (the Greek here implies the completion and ending) in our weakness. This same root word of finality was used by our Lord when he cried from the cross, ***“It is finished!”*** God’s grace is mightier than the thorn He allows.

The power of his grace spreads over us, covering us with himself and his strength in our great weakness. Hence, our Lord's comforting words, ***"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect [complete] in weakness"*** (2 Corinthians 12:9). This is totally counterintuitive and only understood by faith! ***"Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon [cover] me. . . . For when I am weak, then I am strong"*** (vs 9–10).

As our Lord said to the Eleven before his crucifixion, ***"I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world"*** (John 16:33). From Peter, ***"Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good"*** (1 Peter 4:19). From John, ***"For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?"*** (1 John 5:4–5).

And finally, from the writer to the Hebrews, ***“For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need”*** (Hebrews 4:15–16).

Regardless of who is in the Oval Office, Congress, or state houses, God’s grace trumps any thorn we may bear in this nation. And it is the same in our parishes. No matter who is in the pews or the pulpit, God’s grace is greater than any thorn we may experience. We have been appointed as his children in our Baptism, and he holds us near and dear because he is a good and gracious Father. In the name of Jesus.

Amen