

Is Divine Blessing Enough?

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*God said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you."
—Paul*

Ancient Witness: 2 Corinthians 12:7b-10

You've probably heard of that phrase made popular by the recovering community: "Let go and let God." This saying speaks to that spiritual goal of placing ourselves in the hands of the unnamable Mystery, giving over our worries and cares, trusting that God will provide, finding our one true hope in God.

But letting go can be very difficult, frightening and terrifying.

Some of you have probably heard the story of the man who was enjoying visiting the beautiful view from the top of the Grand Canyon, when suddenly the wooden posts gave way from their moorings, and he found himself plunging into the abyss. Somehow, about 20 feet down, he grabbed onto the branch of a scrubby tree that was growing out of the canyon wall.

So there he was. Gasping, he looked up and he looked down. No way could he climb that sheer cliff. And below yawned the chasm, unbroken by any other tree or holding place. Desperate, he cried out, "God help me!" Hearing only his own trembling voice, he cried out again, "Please, God, help me."

To his amazement, he heard an answer. "Alright," said the voice. And then the voice said, "Let go."

Looking down, the man saw the huge boulders waiting below, and he knew that if he let go he would surely die. "But, God, you don't understand!" he yelled up. "Let go," the voice repeated. The man was silent. He thought for a moment. And then he called out again: "Is anybody else up there?"

Often it's not our theology that's the problem; it's the letting go that is the critical part. We long for release, but so long as we hold on, we are stuck. Having goals and objectives, ambitions and desires, are not bad things. But the tendency is to hold onto them too tightly. We need to be able to let them go for something we cannot understand or even name. Sometimes we even need to let go of our belief systems. Our ideas about God are not God. They are but a pale imitation. We need to let go of even these to experience God's presence and grace. This is the essential, yet almost impossible and unreachable spiritual goal. Of all the challenges that we face in our lives, the spiritual challenge will be the toughest and most demanding.

In today's reading, Paul is writing about dealing with his own weaknesses, his own pain, his "thorn in the flesh." As you may know, Paul earlier had a remarkable conversion experience. After he encountered a dream-vision of the risen Christ, his life was completely different. It was a vision of a man who had compassion for the poor and the outcasts, a man who ate with sinners

and prostitutes, a man who denounced greed and hard-heartedness, a man who was brutally killed because he had given himself away to God. He let go.

And so after Paul met the vision of *this* man, he was changed forever.

And in another vision, Paul hears the voice of God say: “My grace is sufficient for you.”

What does this mean? Well, for one, I think Paul is saying that God does not shield us from pain. In fact, in a different letter Paul lists all sorts of bad things that faithful people experience: famine, persecution, nakedness, poverty, distress, even martyrdom. No, for Paul, God does not promise that these things will not happen. God does not promise a growing church. What God does promise is God’s grace, God’s love, God’s presence. And this, says the vision, is enough.

But is it? Is it enough for us? If we were to face failure—failure at home, in our health, in our job, as a church, as a nation—would we still be able to say with joy and thanksgiving, “God’s grace is enough?” This is an important question. In fact, it is central to faith. To get to a point where we can say as individuals and as a congregation, “You know what? No matter what happens, God’s grace is sufficient,” is the final stage spiritual growth. It is simple, but oh, so difficult!

Paul Tillich, one of the greatest theological minds of the 20th century, used to be challenged by people from time to time. When someone would say, “I don’t believe in God,” Tillich would typically respond, “Tell me about this God you don’t believe in.” And as the individual spelled out problems with the Old Man in the Sky, Tillich would simply say, “Well, I don’t believe in that God, either.” Maybe one of our problems with belief is that we have outgrown the God of our childhood—the Santa Claus God or the Good Parent God—and we have never developed an understanding more in keeping with our adult experience, or as far as that goes, with the contemporary experience.

Such a Divine Reality is not so much a wish-fulfilling God as a hope-imparting God. There’s a difference. One of my favorite preachers was a Southern Baptist writer named Will Campbell. And I once heard him draw a distinction between what we might *wish for* and what we find our *hope in*. In other words, my hope and my wishes are not the same. This is a very important distinction, for we are people of hope, upheld by hope.

Now, my wishes might even be very good wishes, such as an end to hunger, homelessness, racism, war, crime, and so on. I may wish for the safety and survival of the planet, protecting a functional democracy from authoritarianism and fascism. I may wish for many virtuous things, but my *hope* does not ultimately lie in them, even though they may be very good wishes. Look, we should all wish for good, important things, and fight for just causes. I’m not saying we shouldn’t. But my hope is in something that has been there all along: God’s loving presence. What is *sufficient* for me is this.

This problem of equating our hope with wishes is that when our wishes are not fulfilled, our hope then dissipates into thin air.

Paul beautifully talked about this hope in the eighth chapter of his letter to the Roman church:

I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God...

So this is my hope. I may even wish to be more obedient, more faithful, more courageous, but even these are not my hope. The hope is the Presence. For when we fail, and we will fail, this Presence will still be there.

The point that I'm making is that we get into trouble when we substitute our wishes for this singular hope. It's good to want to be obedient, loving and faithful; it's good to work for justice and transformation. But we can't substitute even these for our one hope, it seems to me.

Buddhists talk about accepting life "just as it is," letting go of the desires to have a different reality than the one we have, letting go of our need to have our wishes fulfilled.

Here's the spiritual truth: You *already have* everything you need for contentment and deep happiness! Furthermore, you've *always had* everything you need for abiding peace and utter joy. It's been there all along!

The problem is that we don't see this. We're too busy trying to hold on to those things we think we need to be truly happy. Buddhists refer to these things we think we need to be happy as "attachments." And it is only by dropping these attachments—these wishes, these goals—that we discover this deep unshakable peace. It is only by letting go of one's agenda and one's self image that one discovers the Sacred Aspect, the Divine Presence embedded in ourselves and all of life. We find a grace that is sufficient.

For me, that medieval mystic, Meister Eckhart, put it so well when he said,

God is not found through the process of addition; God is found through the process of subtraction.

That is, the Sacred Reality, the Divine Presence or Grace, is at the heart of life itself. If you could strip away everything, it's still there. And often it is through terrible subtraction that we discover this magnificence, this holiness, this shimmering reality, that is there all along.

Writing from a Christian perspective, Kathleen Fischer, in her book, *Winter Grace*, said,

... [the] final hope is based on communion, a union with God that is indestructible...death cannot sever our bond with God. All our smaller hopes are drawn from this one large hope.

Our wishes can be shattered; hope cannot. But moving beyond our wishes to this "one large hope" is no small matter. Here's a story:

Each day the disciple would ask the same question: "How shall I find God?"

And each day he would get the same mysterious answer: "Through desire."

"But I desire God with all my heart, don't I? Then why have I not found God?"

One day the master happened to be bathing in the river with the disciple. He pushed the man's head under water and held it there while the poor fellow struggled desperately to break loose.

The next day it was the master who began the conversation. "Why did you struggle so when I held your head under water?"

"Because I was gasping for air."

"When you are given the grace to gasp for God the way you gasped for air, you will have found God."

Often, it is not until we have a crisis or experience suffering that we "gasp for God." Sometimes the shattering of our dreams and wishes can lead us to realize our one large hope: the sufficiency of grace, the indestructible union with God.

When we are able to give up our wishes for success and ambitions, when we are able to let go, it is then we can find true contentment, joy and peace of God's presence. And it is then that our lives will be truly free to serve others, to work for justice. We can seek our best wish, but only if it is not our hope.

A story by Anne Lamott in her book, *Operating Instruction*, reminds me of the assurances of God's grace we receive. A friend of hers took her two-year-old to a lake resort one summer. They stayed in a rented condo, and the mother put the baby to bed in his playpen in one of the rooms, closed all the blinds and the drapes to make it dark, and went into the next room to do some work. A few minutes later she heard her baby knocking on the door from inside his room. He had managed to get out of his playpen and had pushed the little button on the doorknob and locked himself in. He was calling to her in the pitch dark, "Mommy, Mommy," and she was saying back to him, "Jiggle the doorknob."

But, of course, he didn't speak much English. Mostly he spoke "Urdu," says Lamott, but after awhile he did understand that his mother couldn't open the door. And panic set in. He began sobbing. There he was in the dark, this terrified little child. Finally the mother did the only thing she could think to do: she slid her fingers underneath the door, where there was a one-inch space. She kept telling him over and over again to bend down and find her fingers. Finally, somehow he did.

So they stayed like that for a really long time, on the floor, him holding onto her fingers in the dark. He stopped crying. She wanted to go call the fire department or something, but she felt that her touch was the most important thing. She kept saying, "Open the door now," and every so often he'd jiggle the knob, and eventually, after maybe half an hour, it popped open.

Lamott comments:

I keep thinking of that story, how much it feels like I'm the two-year-old in the dark and God is the mother and I don't speak the language. She could break down the door if that struck her as the best way, and ride off with me on her charger. But instead I have my

friends and my church and my shabby faith. I can just hold her fingers underneath the door. It isn't enough, and it is.

Now, I'm like you. I have lots of wishes. Some of them, I think are pretty important. Yet I also know that in an instant it can all be gone. In an instant there can be persecution, peril and distress.

But in the darkest of nights, there is a light beyond and within all things. There will be a hand under the door, the touch of a love beyond any love we have known or could put to words.

Sufficient for our doubt.

Sufficient for our fear.

It is enough.

(NOTE: The spoken sermon, also available online, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)