

Rejoice! God's Grace Is Sufficient!
Philippians 4:1-7
July 21, 2019

A few years ago, there was an ad on TV that started like this: There is a woman sitting in a car. She's minding her own business, and suddenly a man comes out of nowhere, rips the door open, grabs her, and roughly pulls her out of the car. It looks like he's attacking her. Then the camera pulls back, and we see that the car is actually on fire, but the woman didn't know it. The man wasn't attacking her; he was rescuing her. The ad finishes by saying, "You need the bigger picture. Channel 10 News gives you the bigger picture."¹

The ad makes a good point. We need to have the bigger picture.

Would it be possible that some of the disappointing and even difficult circumstances we face can be blessings in disguise? If we get the bigger picture of them, will we be able to see God's blessings in them?

Through Prophet Jeremiah the Lord said, "For I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, to give you hope and a future."²

You know, having true gratitude in life gives us hope and contentment even in disappointing circumstances. If we saw a bigger picture of what is going on when we are facing difficult situations, we would be much more content and be at peace. I say seeing the bigger picture, but what it means is to have the assurance that the Lord protects and blesses us. Having such assurance gives us peace and joy in life.

In 1 Thessalonians, St. Paul encourages us to "Be joyful always, (to) pray continually, and (to) give thanks in all circumstances."³ Why? Because God is gracious, faithful and dependable; and he will carry us through all challenges of life. In Isaiah, the Lord said, "I will strengthen you; I will help you; I will uphold you with my victorious right hand."⁴

The Bible teaches us that the Lord is dependable. Life is a gift of God; and the giver of that life will help us to enjoy it and will help us make something out of it. He is faithful in helping and strengthening us.

¹ <https://www.preachingtoday.com/sermons/sermons/2011/october/godsfaithfulness.html>

² Jeremiah 29:11 New International Version.

³ 5:16-18 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

⁴ 41:10b NRSV

After the great flood in Noah's time, God made a covenant with Noah and all his creation. He said he would never again destroy the earth as a consequence of human sin. God said, "As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease."⁵ In other words, God's creation is dependable; and this dependability is a gift of God.

We do not deserve God's dependability, yet he remains dependable. Though we are unfaithful to him, God remains faithful.

An American poet Edward Estlin Cummings (e e cummings) has written a wonderful poem about God's faithfulness. It is called "O Sweet Spontaneous." In this poem, he lists all of the terrible things we human beings do to nature. We buffet it, poke it, punch it, and abuse it. Then at the end of the poem, he writes: "Thou answerest them only with spring." He says no matter what we do to his gifts, God always gives us a new chance to enjoy them again, and this time he hopes that we take care of them a little better.

God's faithfulness is indescribable and incomprehensible. He responds to our abuses and misuses of his gifts with spring, with a renewed chance to begin again. "As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall never cease."

Our life, health, possessions, relationships, opportunities, employment, and all the things we enjoy are the gifts from God. However, we often do not recognize that God has given us these not only to enjoy them but also to manage them well. The sad thing is because we believe we own them and it is ours to do whatever we want, we often abuse them.

Gracious God, however, responds with spring; with a new chance.

Have you noticed that the world is dependable, not only in terms of seedtime and harvest, but it is also dependable in bringing us sorrow and pain, fear and anxiety, disappointment and frustration? As long as you live you will have them one way or another.

Everybody has it rough, but St. Paul encourages us to rejoice always regardless of our circumstances. He said, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice." Why? Because he sees the bigger picture that the Lord's plan for our lives is to bless us and to prosper us.

⁵ Genesis 8:22 NRSV.

If anyone had severe difficulties and challenges in life, it was Paul. He was in prison when he wrote this letter to Philippians, the very passage we read this morning. He could not predict his future. He could be executed any moment. He didn't do anything wrong to be in that situation. All he did was to preach the gospel to the Gentiles and collected offerings for the poor people in Jerusalem church. He was in jail because he tried to do something good for somebody else. However, someone did not appreciate him, falsely accused him, and put him in jail. Can you imagine? He had a right to complain. Yet he said to the Philippians, "Rejoice always; again, I say, rejoice!"

He could have had a very negative attitude; but he didn't. Instead he used his situation positively and shared the gospel with the people who would never have an opportunity to hear the gospel.

During his ministry, Paul not only faced all kinds of dangers and suffering but he also had heartbreaking experiences. These experiences came from other Christians.

When Paul began his ministry, some Christians in Jerusalem opposed him from the beginning. They were called Judaizers. They believed that in order to be a Christian, you had to become a Jew first. Paul disagreed, and ministered to the Gentiles. Because of this, he had oppositions from other Jewish Christians. His friends back in Jerusalem, the Judaizers, organized to follow him around the Mediterranean world. As soon as he left one place, they came in and told everybody there, "You know, Paul really isn't an apostle. He is an imposter."

An "apostle," by definition, was somebody who had seen the resurrected Lord.⁶ Paul claimed that he heard Jesus' voice on the Road to Damascus. He encountered the risen Christ. He argued that that was sufficient. Some disagreed.

But Paul told the Corinthians, "You want to see my credentials? Look at my wounds. Look at my sufferings." All my sufferings testify that I am an apostle, the one who is sent by God to preach the Gospel. For Paul, the real test of an apostle was not whether he had seen the resurrected Lord. Rather it is whether he follows the crucified Christ. The real test is whether one carries Christ's cross. He even stated in his letter to the Galatians that he "carries the marks of Jesus" on his body.⁷

⁶ Acts 1:21-25.

⁷ Galatians 6:14-17.

Not only Paul had all kinds of suffering and opposition, he also had an ailment on his body. He called it “the thorn in the flesh.” When he asked the Lord three times to deliver him from that, the only answer he got was “my grace is sufficient for you. Then the Lord also said that the reason for not being delivered from the illness is because “the power of Christ is made perfect in weakness.”⁸ In other words, Paul would have the greater impact with the illness he had. In other words, the Lord was telling him, “If you see the bigger picture, you will know your illness is actually a blessing.”

I believe Paul was able to rejoice always and in all circumstances; because he knew God's grace was sufficient for him, and the power of Christ was made perfect in his suffering and weakness. He saw the bigger picture of how God was involved in his life and how God led him and blessed him.

Do you have suffering in your life? Do you have challenges you cannot overcome? Do you face some fearful situations? God's grace is dependable. We can cast all our cares upon him. God is more than able to handle all our concerns, and he is dependable and faithful.

Throughout the Bible, the Lord said he would help us, hold us, carry us, and strengthen us, no matter what we face in life. My friends, God's grace is sufficient. His presence is sufficient. He is more than anything we face. So, like Paul, let us rejoice always and be thankful in all circumstances!

⁸ 2 Corinthians 12:9