

The Thorn in the Flesh, or Strength Made Perfect in Weakness

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"And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me." 2 Cor. 12:9

The servants of God are often much tried by slanders being cast upon their character, or suspicions entertained of their sincerity, or doubts expressed of their call by grace or of their call to the ministry. But need we wonder that it should be so, when we see that one of the most eminent saints and servants of God that ever breathed was assailed by similar suspicions, and was the object of equally injurious doubts? The Corinthians, for instance, to whom Paul had been so abundantly blessed, the very persons to whom he could say, "In Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel," misled by the crafty insinuations of designing preachers, transforming themselves into the apostles of Christ (2 Cor. 11:13), evidently entertained very strong suspicions whether he was not altogether a reprobate; for in allusion to what had reached his ears upon this point, he says, "I trust that ye shall know that we are not reprobates" (2 Cor. 13:6), language which he could not and would not have made use of unless some such opinion of him had been expressed by them. Yet these suspicions, unjust as they were, induced him, as if in necessary self-defence, to bring forward an experience which had lain hidden in his bosom for fourteen years. As some of his own spiritual children disclaimed him as their father, even at the risk of proclaiming thereby their own bastardy, he felt himself imperatively called upon to

speak of the revelations of the Lord with which he had been favoured and blessed; and thus the very suspicions entertained against him by the Corinthians, the very doubts cast by them upon his call by grace, and his call to the ministry, were made the means of bringing out of his bosom an experience of the Lord's grace and power, which might have lain for ever buried there, and which but for these suspicions the church of God would have utterly lost. To this, therefore, I shall now direct your attention, as being closely and intimately connected with our text. He tells us, then, in the beginning of this chapter (2 Cor. 12.), that he "knew a man in Christ"—doubtless himself—"above fourteen years ago, (whether in the body," he says, "I cannot tell; or whether out of the body, I cannot tell; God knoweth); such an one caught up to the third heaven. And I knew such a man, (whether in the body, or out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;) how that he was caught up into paradise, and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter." How unspeakably great, how divinely ravishing, must this manifestation of Christ have been to his soul, when it so overcame his bodily and mental faculties that he could not tell whether he was in the body or out of the body; in other words, whether, leaving his body here below, he was caught up in his spirit into the third heaven, there to behold unspeakable sights and there to hear unutterable words, or whether body and soul were both alike borne aloft into the paradise of God. This he leaves as matter of uncertainty; for it was not clear to his own mind, though the reality and blessedness of the revelation were as certain to him as his own existence.

But he stays not there; and as he had spoken of the blessedness of the manifestation he lets us see also what was its sequel, which is as important a part on the other side of the question—the dark and gloomy side—as the revelation

itself on the happy, bright, and glorious side. He would not hold himself up before the Corinthian church as a saint so highly favoured without showing them the counterpoise which God gave him in the opposite scale. He therefore adds, "And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure." He, like ourselves, was still in the flesh; his heart, like yours and mine, was "still deceitful above all things and desperately wicked;" and such being the case, his corrupt nature would have availed itself even of the grace of God to lift him up with spiritual pride; for, as Hart truly says, that vile monster,

"The heart uplifts with God's own gifts,
And makes e'en a grace snare."

The Lord, therefore, saw it needful, as he had given him a high sail, to load his ship with proportionate ballast, that he might sail the more steadily, and not capsize under the first heavy gale. As then he had exalted him with his own hand to the heights of heaven, so he thought fit to depress him to the very gates of hell, that he might have in his bosom a daily counterpoise to those liftings up of spiritual pride which would otherwise have swelled his heart to his own injury, and the marring of his usefulness and acceptance among the saints of God, if there had been no such check to counteract its workings. But though most profitable, yet this dispensation was most painful; so that being scarcely able to live under the burden of this distressing temptation, thrice he besought the Lord, that is, upon three special occasions when the Lord favoured him with access to his throne of grace, that it might depart from him, the pressure of it being too great to bear. But instead of hearing his prayer in the way he desired and taking it away, the Lord gave him those

words which form the first part of our text, and from which, in connection with what immediately follows, I shall hope, with God's blessing, to speak this morning:—"And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me."

Now as we have not the abundance of Paul's revelations, so we may not have the abundance of Paul's temptations; for these two things for the most part stand in proportionate relation to each other. Still we may have a thorn in the flesh, if not so large and sharp as Paul's; still we may have a messenger of Satan to buffet us, if not armed with equal malice or if he do not assail us with equal fury. If, then, we have in our flesh this rankling thorn and this buffeting messenger of Satan, we shall need what Paul needed; if not in equal measure, yet at least according to our degree. We shall need the grace of Christ and the strength of Christ; and not only so, but we shall have to prove each for himself that Christ's grace is sufficient for us whatever the thorn may be, and that Christ's strength is made perfect in our weakness whether that weakness be much or little. If, then, we have a thorn and find the grace; if we experience the weakness and realise the strength, we shall be able also with the apostle to glory even in our infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon us. It is in this experimental way that the word of truth is opened up with divine light and life to our souls, and that we understand the scriptures as realising in our own hearts both the pain and the pleasure, the sorrow and the joy, the temptation and the deliverance, the trial and the blessing, which are the invariable lot of those who are led by the blessed Spirit into the truth of God.

With God's blessing, therefore, in opening up our subject, I

shall,

I.—*First*, drop a few remarks upon *the thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan* which was sent to buffet the apostle.

II.—*Secondly*, show how the Lord's *grace is sufficient* for every trial and temptation which may befall his family.

III.—*Thirdly*, that Christ's *strength is alone made perfect in our weakness*.

IV.—And *lastly*, that this gives occasion to every tried and tempted Christian to *glory in his infirmities*; not as glorying in them for their own sake, but in order that *the power of Christ may rest upon him*.

I.—There have been many conjectures, and some very foolish ones, as to the nature of this thorn in the flesh which was given to Paul. Men who know nothing of spiritual things, in their own experience, are as unable to understand and explain matters of this kind as I should be to write a treatise upon astronomy or to publish a grammar in Arabic. Thus some have said that it was the colic, others the gout; some have thought that it was a pain in the ear; others the gravel or the stone; and others the headache; some have explained it that it was a fit of stammering that he was seized with when he went to preach; and others that it was an attack upon his nerves which distorted his face. I have named these ridiculous interpretations to show how wildly and foolishly men can write who have no experience to teach them better; for I am well assured that unless preachers and commentators know something of spiritual things in their own soul, they must needs be bad interpreters of the word of God, and can only betray to a discerning eye their ignorance and folly when they attempt to explain what can only be understood by personal experience. Guided by this light, let

us now look at the words as they stand before us, and let us seek to penetrate into their hidden signification, when we have first laid bare the meaning of the figure as it stands in the letter.

i. Take, then, the simple idea, divested of all such explanations as I have given you a specimen of—"a thorn in the flesh!" What thoughts does that emblem present to your mind? It is an experience of which we all know something literally, for we can scarcely gather a rose-bud or put our hand into the hedge to pick a violet without knowing something of a thorn running into our hand. But what would be your *first* feeling if such a misfortune happened to you? Would it not be that of *pain*? For the moment that a thorn enters the flesh, pain is the first intimation of the presence of so unwelcome an intruder.

1. Paul's thorn then must have been something attended with *pain and suffering*.

2. But take another idea connected with the running of a thorn into the flesh. Would it not immediately *hamper* our movements? If a thorn run into our foot, it lames us, we cannot walk without feeling it; if a thorn run into our hand, we cannot grasp an object as before; and thus for a time both hand and foot are rendered useless. In gathering up then the meaning of the figure, as indicating the experience of Paul, you must take, beside that of pain, the idea of something *crippling* and *hampering* every spiritual movement.

3. Take another thought, that naturally springs out of the same figure: we are *restless* until the thorn is extracted. The pain is so great, especially if the thorn be large and deep-seated, and every movement is so hampered thereby, that

there is no rest to body or mind until it is got out. And I may here observe that the word translated "thorn" means in the original one of no common magnitude, and signifies rather a "stake" than a thorn.

4. But take a fourth idea: if the thorn be not extracted, the flesh *rankles and festers*. The entrance of the thorn does not merely cause momentary pain, like a cut with a knife, but the wound it makes gets worse and worse by the thorn continuing in it, and must do so until it be removed.

No painful feeling, then, no experience, however deep, can be called "a thorn in the flesh" unless it produce or be accompanied by those four circumstances it must be *painful*; it must *hamper* and cripple all spiritual movements; it must make the soul *restless* until extracted; and if left to rankle, it cannot but produce a *festering* wound.

ii. But let us not stop here. Let us look a little further still into the experience of the apostle, after he had been caught up into the third heaven. Something was given him, whatever it was, not merely as a thorn in the flesh to distress and pain him, but as a *messenger of Satan*, an emissary of the devil, to harass and *buffet him*. And what makes this dispensation more mysterious, it is spoken of as arising out of the express will of God. Looking, then, at the words of the apostle in all their naked strength, without seeking to diminish or explain away their force, it was evidently something that God permitted Satan violently to do, and which came, if I may use the expression, rushing upon him hot from hell. You may wonder, and that naturally, that so holy and godly a man as Paul could have been subject, and that by the express will of God, to these infernal buffetings. But consider his case. Satan does not appear to have tempted our apostle in the ordinary way whereby he allures men to sin. He would have

been proof against such common, what I may call such vulgar, temptations as covetousness, drunkenness, fleshly lust, love of the world, and peddling ambition—temptations whereby Satan now ensnares men as easily as a poacher ensnares a rabbit. There was no use therefore in Satan trying to entangle him with such temptations, as he would have broken through them, as Samson snapped asunder the green withes, or as Behemoth "pierceth through snares." (Job 40:24.) Satan knows well both how to allure and how to attack; for he can crawl like a serpent, and he can roar like a lion. He has snares whereby he entangles, and fiery darts whereby he transfixes. Most men are easily led by him captive at his will, ensnared without the least difficulty in the traps that he lays for their feet, for they are as ready to be caught as he is to catch them. Why need he then roar against them as a lion, if he can wind himself round and bite them as a serpent? But a man like Paul, or to go higher still, like our blessed Lord in the days of his flesh, was proof against all the serpentine wiles of Satan. Paul, therefore, says of himself that "he was not ignorant of Satan's devices" (2 Cor. 2:11). Though he might transform himself into an angel of light, Paul's penetrating eye, as touched by an unction from above, could see through his subtlety and be upon his guard against him. As Satan, then, despaired of success in attempting to entangle him, as he too often entangles us, he assailed him with all the power of hell, rushed upon him as a roaring lion, attacking his soul with all his blasphemies and all his rebellion, as though he would fill him with all his own infernal malice, and breathe into him all his own damnable spirit. As this was permitted by the Lord, for without his permission Satan could have had no power over him, the apostle speaks of this "messenger of Satan" as being "given" him. The Lord did not set Satan on, but did not hold him back. We see this in the case of Job. Satan could not touch Job at first, because God "had set a hedge about

him." But, when, for Job's good, the hedge was removed, then Satan burst in upon him. In the same way, by removing the hedge, the Lord suffered "the messenger of Satan" to break in upon and "buffet" our apostle. But let us apply this a little to our own experience, for it is there that we shall find the best and surest key to open the wards of this intricate lock.

If, then, you or I know anything of the temptations of Satan, and what he can do if allowed of God, we may be able in some faint measure to enter into the experience of our blessed apostle, as having a thorn in our flesh, and as having a messenger of Satan to buffet us. And even if our temptations do not amount to thorns, they may be prickles sharp enough and painful enough to give us a taste of what Paul felt. If, too, they are not driven very deep into our flesh, for the word in the original, as I have intimated, literally means "a stake," yet they may be of sufficient depth to cause much pain and much annoyance, to cripple and hamper our movements, to rankle and fester in our carnal mind, though the suffering may not be a tenth or a hundredth part of that experienced by him who had been in the third heaven; for indeed without his blessings we could not endure his trials, without his heaven we could not bear his hell.

iii. But you will observe that the apostle speaks of the thorn being "*in the flesh.*" It was not struck by the hand of Satan into the new man of grace; it did not fester and rankle in that new spirit born of the Spirit which is perfectly holy, as being created after the image of God in righteousness and true holiness. But it was in the flesh, the old man, the unrenewed part which is the seat of all sin; for there, and there only, Satan could plant it. He has no access to the new man of grace: that is wholly under God's guardianship, kept as the

apple of his eye, and safe from all the attacks of sin and Satan. But the flesh is akin to Satan: it is sinful as he is; rebellious as he is; and blasphemous as he is. I mean not to the same extent, but in the same way. Through this avenue, then, Satan has access to us to drive a thorn into the flesh, as he, with God's permission, could smite the flesh of Job with boils. But he has no access to drive it into the spirit, for that is sacred ground, out of which the Holy Ghost keeps him, as God kept Job's life. If we had no flesh, there would be no place for Satan to plant the thorn. Angels above have no place for it; glorified spirits in heaven have no place for it; and if the saint of God here below were perfectly free from a body of sin and death; if he had no carnal, corrupt nature, no flesh, Satan might go round and round about him, as the enemies of Zion went round about her, marking her towers and bulwarks, and seek in vain to plant a thorn, as they sought in vain to plant their scaling ladders against the walls of Zion. But we having flesh, I may indeed say such a mass of flesh in us, round us, and all about us, and this flesh being thoroughly, as it were, akin to Satan, as being tainted and infected with his sin through the fall, he has not far to go to find a spot in which to drive in the thorn. Let him hurl one of his fiery darts, it cannot well miss so broad a mark as our carnal mind. Have you not found sometimes a sudden thought spring up in your mind that your very soul abhorred, and which made your inmost conscience tremble? *Infidelity*, for instance, has that never pestered you—the very concentrated essence of "The Essays and Reviews" rushing through your mind as a shell against a bombarded town? Have you not sometimes had strange ideas working in your mind about the inspiration of the Scriptures; about the deity and eternal Sonship of the Lord Jesus; about the personality and work of the Holy Ghost; and indeed I may say every truth revealed in the word and made known to the heart by the power of God? When you have read these truths in the

Scripture and in the writings of good men, when you have heard them preached by ministers, or spoken of by the people of God, have you not had floating thoughts, painful suggestions, infidel objections, and grievous workings about their truths and reality, which have much tried and distressed your mind? These were thorns that Satan planted in your flesh, and, as he struck them in, you found they were just as I described a thorn to be; painful, crippling, robbing you of all rest and ease, and inflicting rankling, festering wounds. Have you not also at times had very *rebellious* thoughts against God such as you would not dare to breathe into the ear of your nearest friend, and which I am sure I will not utter or even more than hint at; for many things pass through our minds which we dare not speak with our lips? But if you have known anything of such rebellious feelings, you are not a stranger to my meaning, nor to my prudence in hesitating to give it utterance. That was a thorn in your flesh. And have you not been tempted even to curse and swear, though not only contrary to your religious but even your moral feeling, and it may be that you have never actually sworn an oath in your life? I think I may say I have not sworn an oath for more than thirty years, and yet I feel at times as if the devil filled my wicked heart with all manner of them. I have heard of tender females who have been brought up with the greatest strictness and delicacy and whose inmost mind abhorred the very thought, and yet when called by grace have been so tempted that nothing but the power of God has been able to keep them from giving vent to the vile language that was boiling up in their heart. Was not this a grievous thorn, and what a rankling wound must it have made? And have you not had sometimes very *wicked* thoughts, to say no more, for on such points I dare only hint, about our blessed Lord? and have not those vile imaginations not only pained and distressed your mind, but made you fear that there was not a spark of grace in your soul? What are these trials and

temptations but a thorn in the flesh?

iv. But the apostle speaks of his peculiar temptations as being also "*a messenger of Satan,*" as if Satan had sent an emissary from hell to represent himself, and to do, so to speak, his work. As we send a messenger as a kind of second self, to do what we wish done, to speak what we wish said, to execute what we wish executed; so Satan sent an emissary from the bottomless pit to do his foul work, to speak his base language, to carry his vile errands, and accomplish his infernal schemes against Paul. It is literally "an angel of Satan," an infernal spirit commissioned by his master, the devil, to haunt and waylay the apostle, and thus be "a serpent by the way, an adder in the path."

(Gen.49:17.) As one of Satan's infernal train, this foul fiend was no doubt a faithful messenger, and much refreshed the soul of his master (Prov. 25:13) by executing his errand to the very letter; for from Paul's language he appears to have had no more bowels of compassion on him than Lucifer himself, for he says that he buffeted him. There is something so peculiar and yet so expressive in that word, that I feel I must explain it somewhat minutely. Corinth being a place celebrated for the public games, which took place there every fourth year, the apostle often borrows the figure of these contests to illustrate the various conflicts of Christian experience. One of these games was a public boxing match between two trained pugilists. If, then, we just cast a glance at those celebrated games to which all Greece resorted, and bear in mind how in those days those trained pugilists used to fight, it may cast a light upon the expression "*buffet.*" In our days it is bad and brutal enough for men to fight with their fists; but in ancient times, at least at these public games, it was not considered a sufficient trial of courage and endurance to fight merely with naked fists. The combatants used to bind round their fists what was called a "*caestus;*"

that is, a glove, or rather leather gauntlet, made of thick bull's hide, and well loaded with strips of lead and iron. An ancient poet, Virgil, gives a description of one of these contests, and if I remember right a most horrible scene it must have been, for one of the combatants was nearly killed, and would have been so had the fight not have been stopped, for as it was, his face was almost beaten in. Thus, when we read of the messenger of Satan buffeting our apostle, we may represent to ourselves this agent of the devil striking him as with the loaded caestus, and by his repeated blows beating his face, if I may use the expression, to a mummy; stunning and confusing his mind, and crushing up the very features of God's work on his soul; so that like a vanquished pugilist in the ancient games, who after such a contest was often scarcely recognizable as a human being, our apostle was so stunned and beaten, and his experience so mauled and knocked about by this messenger of Satan, that it seemed scarcely capable of being recognised by himself as the work of grace upon his heart. It is true that the messenger of Satan no more *really* defaced the workmanship of God in his soul than he could plant a thorn in his new man of grace; but reality is one thing, and apprehension another. Thus, though Satan cannot really touch the work of grace upon the heart, yet he can so buffet the feelings, so harass the mind, so stun and stupify the judgment, that all experience becomes in our apprehension a shapeless mass, in which the distinct features of the image of God are well nigh lost. Have you not, when thus buffeted and stunned by the assaults of Satan, started back at times with horror at yourself? (I know I have,) and said, "Can I be a Christian? Is there any mark of grace in my soul? Can ever God dwell here? Could I have such thoughts, temptations, and feelings if my body were indeed the temple of the Holy Ghost?" Now you who know something of those exercises,—and what living soul knows not something of them?—have a

counterpart in your own bosom to Paul's thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet him.

II.—But let us now approach our second point, and see what *help and relief* were afforded to our apostle under those distressing conflicts. He tells us that "he besought the Lord thrice that it," or rather that "he," that is, the messenger of Satan, "might depart from him;" or, as the word literally means, stand off or away from him. As we should beg the owner of a dog to call him off from worrying a sheep, so Paul begged of the Lord to call off the messenger of Satan from worrying his soul. But did the Lord hear and answer that prayer? No; not in its literal import. He would not, therefore, take it away; it came by his permission; it was intended for Paul's spiritual good. He would not, therefore, he could not consistently with his own wise purposes, remove the temptation; and therefore, instead of taking it away, he dropped that sweet promise into his soul which I have now to unfold: "*My grace is sufficient for thee.*" It is as if the Lord had said by it, "Paul, the thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan, are temptations very painful to bear, but they are sent for thy benefit. Thou hast been highly blessed, greatly favoured, by what thou hast seen and heard in the third heaven: so much sail will be too much for thee, if thou hast not proportionate ballast. Thou must have this thorn to humble thy pride; this messenger of Satan to buffet thee, lest thou be exalted above measure. All, therefore, that I can do for thee is to give thee my grace, that thou mayest bear it patiently, and I promise thee that it shall not be given in vain, for my grace is sufficient for thee."

1. What are we to understand by the word "*grace*" here? We may understand two things: first, grace as signifying the *favour* of Jesus; for the word "grace" in scripture means literally favour. In that sense, it is as though the Lord said,

"Nothing shall alter my love to thee. If thou art tempted to rebel, to disbelieve, to give way to injurious suspicions and base suggestions; if Satan buffet thee and fill thy mind with every vile thought, these upheavings of thy wretched heart under temptation do not alter my love toward thee, nor stop the current of my eternal and unchangeable favour. This favour of mine, as being in myself, independent of all creature circumstances, is sufficient for thee." The Lord knew that Paul hated himself, for his vile and rebellious feelings; that he grieved and groaned under, and was exceedingly distressed by them; he would not, therefore, impute it to him as sin when he hated the very thoughts that sprang up in his carnal mind against his better will. Let me seek to illustrate this point by a figure. A father may have two sons: one of them may be a reckless, careless, disobedient youth, full of health and strength, but who is ever grieving him by his misconduct. The other may be a poor cripple from his very birth, or afflicted with a pining sickness. Now surely, though the father of both, he will not treat these two sons in a similar way. He loves them both, because they are his sons; but the reckless, disobedient youth who grieves his heart will not experience at his hands the same kind treatment as his poor afflicted brother. Neither serves his father; the one from want of will, the other from want of power. If age admit he chastises the one; but does he chastise the poor cripple, the paralytic, the gasping, coughing boy lying upon a bed of consumption? Does he love him the less for these bodily sufferings which disable him from active employment? Surely he will not take away his love from his sick child because his afflictions render him incapable of working for him. Will he not rather feel as if they were his own? How we see this in the case of the father who brought his son to Jesus to be healed of a dumb spirit! "If thou canst do anything have compassion on *us* and help *us*." (Mark 9:22.) How he identifies himself with his afflicted son—"help *us*." Is not this

true also as regards the Lord and his suffering people? "In all their afflictions he was afflicted." (Isai. 63:9.) When, then, from heaven his dwelling-place the gracious Lord looks down upon a child of his, and sees him mangled and torn by a thorn in the flesh, so that he cannot walk as he would from a thorn in his foot, nor grasp a promise as he would from a thorn in his hand, nor see as he would from a thorn in his eye, nor pray as he would from a thorn in his knee, is his grace the less? "Is his mercy clean gone for ever? Does he forget to be gracious? does he in anger shut up his tender mercies?" (Psalms. 77:8, 9.) Or when he sees, according to his own permission, the messenger of Satan falling upon a child of God, and buffeting him by his powerful blows, does he look down upon his afflicted saint with anger because he reels and staggers under the assaults of his enemy? If you, a, parent, saw your child in the street and some stronger boy beating him, would you love him less for his torn clothes and bleeding face? So with the Lord when he sees his poor suffering children groaning and sighing under the thorn in their flesh, or bleeding in soul from Satan's powerful strokes, he does not take away his love and mercy from them because under these trials and temptations they cannot serve him as they would. In this sense, therefore, the Lord said to Paul, "My grace is sufficient for thee."

2. But look at the word "grace" in another sense, which indeed seems to be the meaning intended here, *the manifested communication of this favour through the Spirit*. When our blessed Lord rose from the dead and ascended on high, he received gifts for the rebellious. "It pleased the Father that in him should all fulness dwell." (Col. 1:19), "and out of this fulness we receive grace for grace." (John 1:16.) This grace, then, out of his own fulness he freely bestows upon the suffering members of his mystical body here below; for he has in himself an ocean fulness to supply their every

need, which made Paul say, "My God will supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus." (Phil. 4:19.) When, then, the Lord said to Paul, "My grace is sufficient for thee," it is as if he would thereby assure him of divine support under the trial; that the temptation should not prove his destruction, as he should have strength given him to endure it. This exactly agrees with what we read elsewhere, "God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it." (1 Cor. 10:13.) This grace the Lord puts forth in communicating secret supplies of strength, as David found when he said, "In the day when I cried unto thee thou answeredst me, and strengthenedst me with strength in my soul." (Psalm 138:3.) As, then, the grace of the Lord in the season of trial and temptation is found to be sufficient, it gives the soul a firm standing-place, a holy rest, an object, even the Lord himself, for faith to look unto, an all-sustaining prop for weakness to lean upon; and as the grace of the Lord is thus vouchsafed under trial and temptation it is found to be sufficient—but not more than sufficient.

3. Let us look, then, at this word "*sufficient*." It is not superfluous, but sufficient—enough but nothing to spare. In nature, there is enough, but not more than enough. Expenditure, but not waste; abundance, but not superfluity, is the grand law of creation stamped upon the inhabitants of sea, earth, and sky. The same law holds good in the new creation. No saint of God will ever have too much grace. He will have enough to supply his need; enough to save and sanctify him; enough to fit him for his place in the mystical body of Christ; enough to support him under his afflictions; enough to make him live honourably and die happily, but not more than enough. This was typically shown in the gathering of the manna in the wilderness, when "he that gathered

much had nothing over, and he that gathered little had no lack." (Exod. 16:18.) "As thy days so shall thy strength be;" but not more than thy day or less than thy need. Have you not found this the rule of God's procedure hitherto? Take a review of the numerous trials through which you have passed since his fear was first planted in your heart. Has he not been faithful to every promise of strength and support? Has his grace ever proved insufficient in the hour of need? Can you remember any trial, temptation, or affliction in which when you really felt your need of help from the sanctuary it was withheld? "By the grace of God," said the apostle, "I am what I am;" no less, no more. Can you not say the same? Why are you now where and what you are? Who held you up in the trying hour? Who preserved you when your feet were almost gone, when your steps had well nigh slipped? What but his grace? When the enemy came in like a flood, who by his Spirit lifted up a standard against him? Have you not thus far proved that his grace is sufficient? and so you will keep proving it to the end. But how are we to prove this? for we must realise it that we may truly know it. By ever looking unto the Lord, leaning upon him, and seeking supplies of this grace out of his fulness. How was it with Paul? The thorn made him pray; the messenger of Satan made him cry and groan. They were made instruments of bringing him to the footstool, there to wrestle with the Lord, and beg of him that those enemies of his soul's peace might depart from him. The Lord, it is true, did not answer those prayers just as Paul wished; they were not, however, rejected, but answered in a different shape. "I cannot take it away," said the Lord; "but I will give thee strength to bear it. It is given thee for thy good: it is better for thee that this thorn should still remain in thy flesh, but my grace shall be sufficient for thee. If tempted to rebel, thou shalt not be a rebel; if tempted to infidelity, thou shalt not be an infidel; if tempted to blasphemy, thou shalt not be a blasphemer; if tempted to

doubt and fear, thou shalt not be given up wholly to unbelief."

III.—But, though much honey still remains in this honey-cup, let us not linger here, but, like the bee, seek to gather another store out of the second portion of the Lord's declaration to his suffering apostle: "*For my strength is made perfect in weakness.*"

1. The blessed Lord is the strength of his people. This made David say, "The Lord is my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer; my God, my strength, in whom I will trust; my buckler, and the horn of my salvation, and my high tower." (Psa. 18:2.) It is a humbling lesson to learn, but blessed when learnt, that all the strength we have to fight and gain the victory is wholly from the Lord. We have no strength to believe, to hope, or to love, to seek him or to serve him, to live holy, or to die happily, but as he is graciously pleased to work in us both to will and to do of his good pleasure. This lesson every child of God has to learn in his own experience. And how does he, for the most part, learn it? In no way so effectually as by a thorn in the flesh; for this mars all creature strength by hampering every movement, and thus teaches us inwardly and experimentally our weakness—the only real way of learning it. How weak is a man to walk if he has a thorn in his foot! How weak to handle if he has a thorn in his hand! And if this thorn be continually there, and if the flesh in consequence rankle and fester, how in time it will drain all his strength away, and turn an open wound into a running sore! Thus the Lord cannot take a more effectual way to teach us our weakness than by allowing Satan to plant a thorn in our flesh. How can we think, for instance, that faith is in our own power, if tempted every day with infidel thoughts? or that a good hope through grace is at our command, if tempted to despair? or that love is a fruit of our

own exertions, when enmity and rebellion are working in our carnal mind under the influence of the thorn in the flesh? Or how can we dream of any one good thing dwelling in our flesh, when a festering wound is ever manifesting the corruption of our fallen nature? Can the Lord more effectually show us our weakness than by suffering Satan to plant a thorn in our flesh, that through this ever-running sore all our strength may drain away? If ever you learnt weakness, it was in the hour of temptation; if ever your strength was drained away, it was under the assaults of Satan. Thus, the Lord, so to speak, outshoots Satan with his own bow; defeats the tempter with his own arts; and as he makes the wrath of man to praise him, so the very assaults of hell he turns to his own glory. You may mourn and sigh under your daily thorn; but, it is indispensably necessary for every Christian to learn his weakness. It is a lesson most painful, yet most profitable; for nothing is so deceptive as to think we are strong when we are weak. Such fancied strength resembles the convulsive struggles of a fever patient, or of a raging lunatic in an asylum. It takes the united strength of four men to hold him; but it is the mere working of frenzy that gives strength to his muscles. Take away his disease, and the man is as weak as a child. There is no greater fallacy than to think ourselves strong when we have no strength at all. It is but the delirium of brain fever, the fitful strength of insanity. But how can we learn our weakness? How can we teach a madman in an asylum, that he has no strength when he can grapple with four or five keepers and they are unable to keep him in bed? Get the disease out of him, and then he will learn his weakness. So was it with the man who had his dwelling among the tombs. Chains and fetters could not bind him. But when the devil was cast out he came and sat all weakness at Jesus's feet, clothed and in his right mind. Cruelly had Satan buffeted him, but he was thereby brought to Jesus. So our daily thorn is our daily teacher, and the lesson it teaches is,

"O, soul; how weak thou art! How unable to do anything except the Lord is pleased to do it in thee and for thee!"

2. But how suitable to our experience of our helplessness are the Lord's words, "My strength is *made perfect in weakness.*" As, then, we learn our weakness, we begin to learn our strength. "When I am weak, then am I strong." We begin to look out of our miserable selves, and look up to the Lord that strength may come from him into our soul. Thus Jeremiah found it, "I called upon thy name, O Lord, out of the low dungeon; thou hast heard my voice; thou drewest near in the day that I called on thee; thou saidst fear not." (Lam. 3:55, 57.) Thus, the Lord, by the application of his word, by a sweet whisper of his love, or by the dropping in of a gracious promise, can in a moment communicate strength. Have you not found it so? In a season of temptation and trial, when it seemed as if you had scarcely a grain of grace in your soul, yet, if the Lord began but to appear in the opening up of some promise, or the application of some word, or the shining in of the light of his countenance, what strength was communicated to believe! Now as faith begins to hold up its head, hope follows in its train, and love brings up the rear. What a strength that is which the Lord gives! How supernatural, how peculiar, how outshining all other! But if we were strong in ourselves, we could not distinguish the Lord's strength from our own. If faith were at my command, how could I tell when I believed for myself and when the Lord was pleased to give me to believe, as well as to suffer for his sake? If I could pray or preach, or you could hear, as and when we pleased, how could we tell the difference between what the Lord does in and for us by his Spirit and grace, and what we do ourselves? But by learning experimentally our own weakness when the Lord is pleased to make his strength known, the contrast is so great that we can see it shining as with a ray of light from heaven, and

then we know what it is to have his strength made perfect in our weakness. Sometimes you cannot *pray*. You may see it desirable to pray, but not a breath of prayer moves upon your soul. You are like a sailor becalmed at sea: he longs to go on, and whistles for the wind, but the breeze does not come and the ship cannot move. There he is it may be for days or weeks without power to move upon the sluggish ocean; but at last, the wind begins to blow, he spreads the sail to the breeze, and now the ship bounds over the rolling waters. Does not that man know the difference between not being able to sail without the wind and sailing with it when the wind comes? Men may call us lazy Antinomians for not always moving on. But is the sailor a lazy sailor because he cannot sail without a wind? Does not his very impatience under the calm disprove the charge of laziness? So it is with us: we are sometimes becalmed, without a single breath of the Spirit moving upon the heart. Then, we can no more really pray, though we may use words, than the sailor can move without the wind though he spread the sail. But if the Lord is pleased to send a gale of his grace, then we can spread the sail to the wind, and ride with flowing sheet over the sea. So it is with the other graces of the Spirit. To *believe* to some persons seems easy enough, and indeed would be so were natural faith the only thing required to salvation; but natural faith being worthless in the things of God, and spiritual faith being a heavenly gift, we are experimentally convinced that we cannot produce it. We thus learn our weakness. But when the Lord is pleased to whisper a sweet promise, or drop in a gracious word, or break in upon your soul with some life and light, you can then believe without the least difficulty. Here, again, is strength made perfect in weakness. So also as regards any gracious *fruit* or the performance of any acts that are to God's praise, we have to learn by painful experience our thorough inability to do them as God would have them done. Nor are words less dependent

upon his grace than actions, for you cannot speak a word in his name with unction or savour, except he open your mouth that you may show forth his praise. Nor can you feel any flowing forth of love and affection towards his saints, if it be not breathed into your heart by a power from above. These lessons of our own weakness and helplessness we are daily learning, and as we are taught them we find also that as without Jesus we can do nothing, so with him we can do all things. Thus it becomes a part of our daily experience to be weak and yet be strong; to have nothing and yet possess all things; to be down in the mud and yet up in the sky; bankrupts in self, yet rich in the Lord; beggars at the door, yet fed by his alms. These are the lessons we learn or should be learning every day, and this is the sum and substance of all, "My strength is made perfect in weakness." You are often troubled and exercised because you are so weak. Would you have it otherwise, if in order to be strong in the Lord you must be weak in yourself? But you say that you should not mind feeling yourself so weak if you always had the Lord's strength made perfect in your weakness; but to be all weakness and yet to find that the Lord does not come in to strengthen,—this is such a trial. No doubt it is, for in this mainly lies the trial of faith. But if the Lord always strengthened you the moment you felt weak, you then would not properly learn the lesson of your weakness. Spiritual poverty in this point resembles natural poverty. If a man in good circumstances were reduced by some sudden and unexpected failure to perfect poverty but were only poor for a day or a week; if his friends came round him with a large subscription and replaced him in his original position, he would not have learnt his poverty by so short an experience of it. But let him be poor for a year or two, and be every day getting deeper and deeper into debt, with no prospect of recovering his position, he would learn the misery of poverty in the most effectual way, even if he were replaced in his

former circumstances. So in grace: if we were to feel weak only for an hour or a day, we should not learn our weakness; but if month after month and year after year we have to groan under increasing helplessness, and only occasionally and perhaps at distant seasons get a supply out of the Lord's fulness, by this experience we learn our weakness, as a man sunk into want learns the experience of poverty by an increasing load of debt.

IV.—But is there no further fruit to be gathered from this tree? Yes! The apostle tells us, as we proposed to consider in our last place, what the *effect* was of the Lord's words upon his heart—a holy acquiescence in the Lord's dealings, and, even beyond this, *a glorying in his very infirmities, that the power of Christ might rest upon him*. I have thought sometimes that one of the greatest marks of grace in the soul, and one of the highest points to which a saint can rise in this life, is the experience which the apostle here describes as the fruit of Christ's strength being made perfect in his weakness. But, mark this, Paul does not glory in his sins. There is a race of men that glory in their iniquities, as if the more a man could sin in defiance of all laws, human and divine, the more manly were his actions. The apostle did not glory in his sins, but in his *infirmities*. The two things are widely different. What, then, are infirmities as distinguished from sins? Why, the weakness of which I have been speaking is an infirmity and yet not a sin; at least, not in the same way or to the same extent as actual transgression. If I cannot raise up in my soul any lively actings of faith in the Lord; if I cannot cast forth the anchor of hope, so as to enter manifestly within the veil; if I cannot love the Lord and his people as I would, these are my infirmities. Thus, when David feared that God's "mercy was clean gone for ever," he adds, "and I said this was my infirmity." (Psl. 77:10.) This infirmity of soul resembles that "spirit of infirmity" in body

wherewith Satan had bound the poor woman in the gospel for eighteen years, so that "she could in no wise lift up herself." These are "the infirmities" which the Spirit helps in prayer (Rom. 8:26), and with the feeling of which our gracious High Priest is touched. These infirmities have indeed in them the nature of sin, as being the sad inheritance of the fall; but they are not wilful transgressions. Weakness is not wickedness; Jacob halting on his thigh is not Esau despising his birthright.

Nor did the apostle glory in his infirmities, as infirmities, but he gloried in them because the power of Christ rested upon him, and so endued him with strength to overcome them. He could not glory in a thorn in the flesh as a thorn, or in the pain caused thereby, or in the messenger of Satan as a messenger of Satan, or in the cruel blows which he gave him; he could not glory even in his weakness as manifested in his helplessness to remove the thorn, or to drive away the messenger. But he could and did glory in his infirmities, as made a means of drawing strength out of Christ into his soul; for so precious was this strength, as experimentally realised, that he could glory in those very infirmities as a means whereby it was communicated. Whatever makes the Lord experimentally known is precious, come through what channel it may. Now, as we realise in this way our weakness, and find the Lord making his strength perfect in it, we gladly and heartily put the crown of glory upon his head.

But, besides this, a felt experience of our infirmities brings us into what I may perhaps call a continual *contact* with the Lord of life and glory; for our weakness, as inwardly felt, is ever bringing us to the throne of grace as needy suppliants that we may receive daily supplies. It is our weakness and the Lord's strength, our need and his supply, our trials and his support under them, that keep up communion with the

Lord. If day by day I could pray, or preach, or write, or perform spiritual acts in my own strength without the Lord working by his power in my soul, what should I want the Lord for? I could do without him; he would be nothing to me. But if I cannot preach, or pray, or write, or believe, or hope, or love, or bring forth any gracious fruit, except the Lord is pleased to communicate of his grace to my heart, a sense of this brings my soul more or less day by day into contact with him that I may get supplies of strength and power out of him. If I can live independent of him, I shall do so. We all dearly love independence: it is the very blood that circulates in all our veins. It used to be my motto in days of old, for I was too proud to be dependent upon anybody for anything. But grace teaches us what we never should learn from nature. Grace has taught me to be dependent, to be nothing, to be full of infirmities; and as I feel these things, it leads me to the Lord that he would make his strength perfect in my weakness, that he would teach me in my ignorance, reveal his atoning blood and dying love to me in my guilt and shame, that privately and publicly, with my pen and with my tongue, in the pulpit and in my house, before the church and in the world, I may find his power resting upon me. Now as these things work in our souls, they bring us into living contact with a living Lord, open up a way of communication between his strength and our weakness, his mercy and our misery, his power and our helplessness. I can tell you how you live day by day, though I may neither see you nor speak to you. If you have no thorn in the flesh; if you have no messenger of Satan to buffet you; if you have no trials or temptations, you have no communications of the Lord's love and mercy, grace and strength to your soul. You may read your Bible, and fall upon your knees with all regularity, but there is no communication out of the fulness of Christ to your heart. But if, on the other hand, you are tried and tempted, distressed and exercised, have a daily thorn, and a

messenger of Satan, and by these means your creature strength is drained away, you want the Lord to come into your soul to give you his grace to strengthen and support you. Thus, these very infirmities and temptations are most blessedly over-ruled for your good and the Lord's glory, by opening up a door of communication between a full Christ and an empty sinner, a gracious and loving Jesus, and a poor, dependent wretch who has nothing and is nothing in himself but sin and misery.

Bless God, then, for your trials; they are the best things that could happen to you. Your very providential trials are so many weights tied round your neck, clogs fastened round your feet to keep you from running in the way of sin; the very temptations you experience are means of emptying and stripping you of Pharisaic pride; the thorn in the flesh and the messenger of Satan are means in God's hands of weakening your strength by the way and convincing you that without Christ you can do nothing. They are indeed painful to bear; they are meant to be so; they would not have the right effect unless they were painful. God does not play with us and will not suffer us to play with him. We want sometimes powerful and painful dealings to bring us to our senses, and shake us out of that dream of false security in which thousands are wrapped up, and to shew us sin and self in their true light. When we are tried and exercised by the thorn and by the messenger, how worldly things fade out of sight! What an empty scene this vain world, with all its pleasures and occupations, is then seen to be! How all here below seems blighted and withered—a vale of tears, a waste, howling wilderness! And as heaven opens with its glory and blessedness, its eternal rest and peace, what a solid reality is found and felt in the grace of Christ, the consolations of the gospel, and the love of God! But would the power and reality of these heavenly blessings be experienced unless there had

been first a weakening thorn to drain away all creature strength—that enemy of the cross of Christ? Would Jesus be known in his blood, love, and grace, if there were neither trial nor temptation, infirmity or suffering to make us feel our deep and daily need of him? Thus the apostle could say, "Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me"—as the pillar and the cloud rested upon the tabernacle; as the divine glory rested upon the mercy seat.

It will be our mercy if we can use his language from any measure of his experience; for as he could glory in his infirmities, that the power of Christ might rest upon him; so shall we just in proportion as we are taught by the same divine Teacher, and have the same faith wrought in our heart by the same power of God.