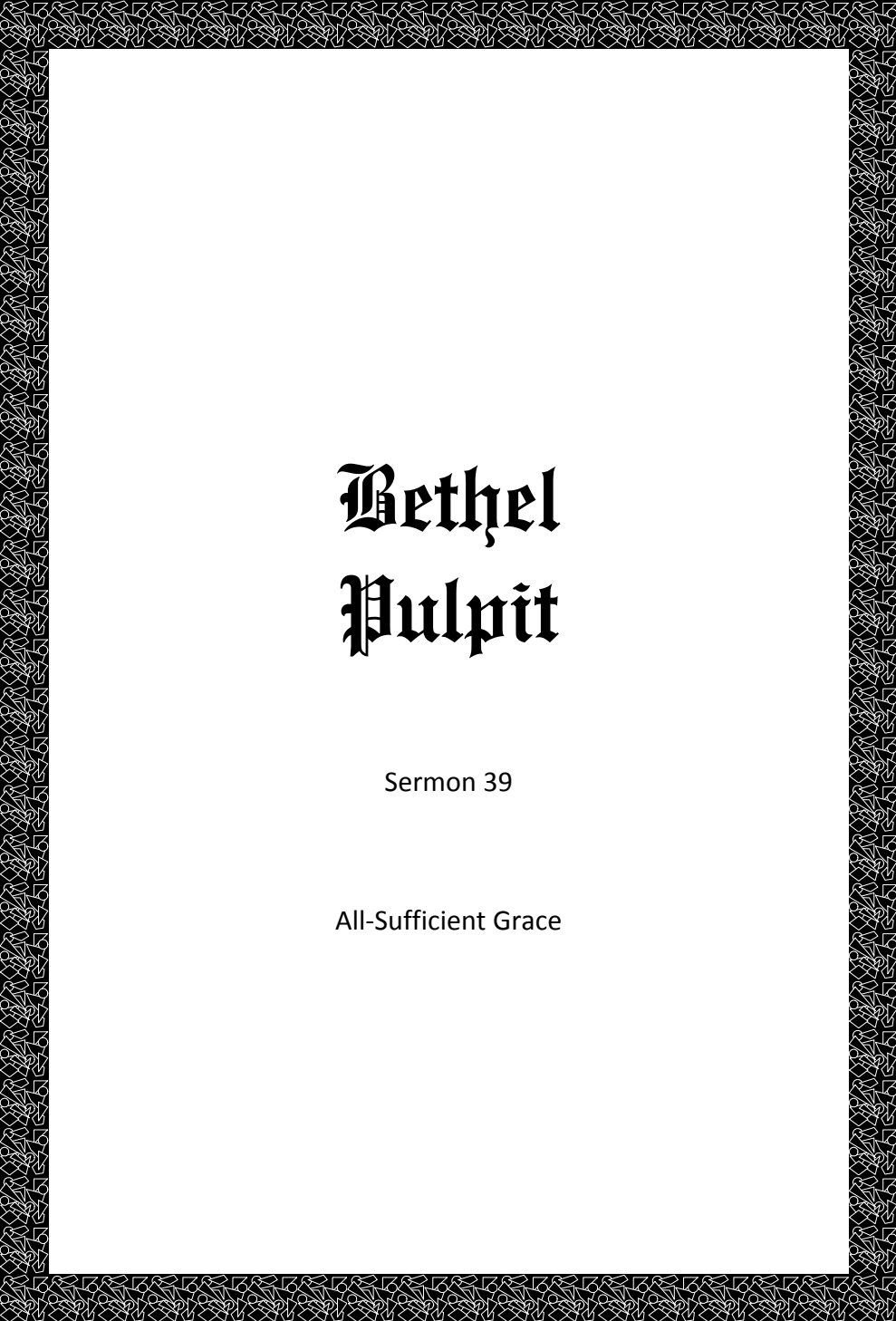




Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 39

All-Sufficient Grace

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day morning, 21st August, 1988**

Text: *“And He said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for My strength is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12. 9).*

The singing of that last hymn (326) takes me back over thirty years to the days when I first began to preach. For weeks in those early days that line of the hymn was with me: “Leaning on all sufficient grace.” Now it was not just the line of the hymn. It was the walking it out. It was the experience. I used to sing coming home from preaching,

“‘Tis sweet to recline on the bosom divine,
And experience the comforts peculiar to Thine.”

Really, it has been so more or less ever since: “Leaning on all-sufficient grace.” God’s grace is all-sufficient; but the point is that we can lean on it. It will never fail us and it will never let us go.

“When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie,
My grace all sufficient shall be thy supply.
The flame shall not hurt thee; I only design
Thy dross to consume, and thy gold to refine.”

What a mercy it is if you and I have any gold that needs refining!

Well, this is the place where Paul was brought, to lean on the all-sufficiency of grace. I believe all of you here who fear God will be brought there, to lean on the all-sufficiency of God’s grace. So often the pathway is a mysterious one, the pathway is a painful one, because our flesh will not lean on all-sufficient grace, will it? Our flesh will not lean on anything gracious. Our flesh likes to be independent. Our flesh likes to do it ourselves.

Now Paul at the beginning of this chapter speaks of being unspeakably blessed. I do not think anywhere, either in Scripture or in Christian literature, we read of anyone being equally blessed. He speaks of being caught up into paradise and hearing unspeakable words which it is not lawful for a man to utter. But there was a danger. You say, “What! even a danger there?” You remember one of our hymnwriters says,

“The heart uplifts with God’s own gifts,
And makes e’en grace a snare.”

Calvin says in one place that why pride is the most dangerous of sins is that most other sins are bound up with wrong-doing or temptation to fall or the carnal mind, and so on. Now pride is the one thing that can lay hold even on a blessing, even on a sinner who is abundantly blessed, and seek to make even that grace a snare.

Now Paul was blessed above measure, but even there he saw the danger. Twice he says, “Lest I should be exalted above measure.” He says that twice close together, twice in the same verse. “Lest I should be exalted above measure.” He saw the danger even amidst all his blessings. The point is, everyone wants to do well, wants to be well-thought-of – the world in its mad chase after pleasure and happiness, prosperity, ambitions to be fulfilled, self to be glorified. It is so easy for the spirit of it to get into the church of God, into the life of a believer. The way of faith must always be a way of humility, self being emptied, self being abased, self being nothing. But so often there are those things in our hearts and lives and circumstances. We would be content with ourselves, we would settle down in ourselves, we would be satisfied with what we have or what we can do, whether it is in nature or in grace.

So we have this very solemn, twice-repeated “lest.” “Lest I should be exalted above measure.” “Lest I should be exalted above measure . . . there was given to me a thorn in the flesh.” God gave it to him. It is described as a messenger of Satan to buffet him, but God gave it to him. And ever since the time when the Word of God was written up to the present time, people have reasoned and argued what Paul’s thorn in the flesh was. Chrysostom, one of the ancient fathers, who I believe was a friend of the apostle John, contended that it was people – people like Hymenaeus and Philetus – that Paul’s thorn in the flesh was people – people who harassed him, people who opposed him, people who tormented him. The general opinion over the ages has been that in some way or other it was bodily affliction. Many have believed that Paul was troubled with poor eyesight, and this was his thorn in the flesh. But really we are not told and we do not know. You can see the mercy in it. One child of God has one thorn in the flesh and another child of God has a different

thorn in the flesh. If we were told what Paul's was, you might have felt that you were left out.

But you know what it means literally. I suppose most people here know what it is to get a thorn in you, and how it hurts. You are only too glad to get it out and you cannot really be happy, you cannot really be content, until you do get it out. It is a terrible thing if it sticks there and you cannot get it out. I do not think any or many of us have had the experience literally of someone coming and beating and buffeting us on the very spot where a thorn in the flesh is. That would be a dreadful thing. But the Word of God does not exaggerate. Paul did not exaggerate. It is a very striking description, something in your life which is always there, something which when you wake up in the morning, it is there, something which when you go to bed, it is there, something which if you wake up during the night, it is there, something you cannot get away from, something which is grieving you and hurting you and plaguing you the whole of the time.

And Paul says that the Lord gave it to him. I suppose some of you may say, "Surely this must be a contradiction." Paul says it was given to him, and then immediately he says it was a messenger of Satan. Old John Kent often goes right to the point. He says,

"Great is the mystery, truly great,
That hell's designs should hell defeat;
But here eternal wisdom shines,
That Satan works what God designs."

Now do you believe that, that Satan is a chained foe and in the end all Satan's malice and evil will work to the honour and glory of God?

The first two chapters in the book of Job are quite a commentary on this messenger of Satan. Satan appears before God. He points to Job and says, "Put forth Thine hand now, and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse Thee." And God gives permission to Satan to afflict Job's body. He says, "Touch not his life. I have set a hedge about my servant Job. You can touch his body, but not his life. Thus far shalt thou go, and no further." You have it in those opening chapters of Job, how Satan can only do what God permits. He could not even touch Job's body without

God's permission, and then when God gave him that permission, he certainly could not touch Job's life.

"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." I wonder if there is anyone here this morning and you feel that you are buffeted, or perhaps you have been buffeted during recent days and months. Don't you find it remarkable how the very terminology of Scripture so often describes your experience better than you can describe it yourself? You have been buffeted. There has been that pricking thing. It may have been out of sight and nobody else could see it. Now beloved friends, this morning what is your thorn in the flesh? What is your messenger of Satan? With some of you is it a sore temptation, and with others is it sore trouble, and with others is it people, and with other is it bodily affliction? But whatever it is, if you have that thorn in the flesh, that messenger of Satan, you know it.

Don't forget, he says, "It was given to me." O the mysterious dealings of God with His people! In the Lord's hand there is a cup, and that cup is full of a mixture, a mixture of sorrow and joy, a mixture of happiness and unhappiness. The Lord gives you that cup to drink. Each one has that measure of the affliction of Christ to fill up in his body, a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan. Paul says, "The things which happened unto me have fallen out rather unto the furtherance of the gospel." They did not just come. They did not just happen. They fell out. There is a divine appointment. "There was *given* to *me* a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan."

So Paul prayed, and you pray, and I pray, and we pray to get out of trouble. We pray for the removing of the thorn in the flesh, to be rid of all this buffeting. So Paul did. "For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me." Some have felt that by the use of this word "thrice," Paul means on a number of occasions, just like when we say, "once or twice," or, "two or three times," we use different numbers for an indefinite number. But the point is, this was something Paul could not get away from. He kept taking it to the Lord in prayer. "For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me." Now did God answer Paul's prayer or did He not? He did not give Paul the answer he

wanted. He did not remove the thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan. But He made it a blessing to Paul. He sanctified it to him. “And He said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee.” God will answer prayer, but it will not always be in the way you expect. Sometimes it is different. But it is to the Lord’s honour and glory and it is for the best.

“For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. And He said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee.” This is one of the very precious words in the New Testament. O the thousands of sinners down the ages who have tried and proved this by experiencing the faithfulness of it! “My grace is sufficient for thee.” We often speak of it as one of the exceeding great and precious promises, and of course we know what we mean, but really this is not a promise. It is more than a promise. It is a statement. “My grace *is* sufficient for thee,” with the emphasis on the word *is*. “My grace *is* sufficient for thee.” You say, “What is the difference?” Well, a person may promise to do something for you. Then there is a time when he actually comes and says, “Now I *am* doing it for you.” There used to be a little hymn (I do not know where it is) on that beautiful word, “Lo I am with you alway” (which again is not just a promise, but it is a statement. “Lo I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world”). That little hymn begins, “Lo, I am with thee – statement more than promise!”

But the weight, the blessedness, the authority, the security of it lies here: “*And He said unto me.*” Do not leave that little bit out. “What more can He say than to you He has said?” “*And He said unto me.*” You have it in a few places. “Be content with such things as ye have: for He hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee.” Another one: “And He said, My presence shall go with thee, and I will give thee rest.”

“*And He said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee.*” Beloved friends, there is everything in the grace of God. Of course the point here we specially think of is concerning trouble, and rightly so, because it is trouble in the context. But as this word has lingered on my spirit during this week, it has been more in a spiritual sense. “My grace is sufficient for thee.” We need a word like this in trouble; we need it in times of great need; but we need it at all times. It reminds me of John Newton. Some of you may have that book that was recently published, *The Thought of Evangelical Leaders*, the report of the meeting of ministers that used to

meet with John Newton. One question discussed was: “What is a special time of need?” Newton said that *every* time was a special time of need with him. Well, we have to prove that, don’t we? But that is a beautiful word: “Grace to help in time of need.”

We need this grace to forgive all our sins. We need this grace daily, continually, to cleanse us from our guilt.

“Plenteous grace with Thee is found;
Grace to pardon all my sin.”

We need this grace when we try to pray. “My grace is sufficient for thee.” We need this grace as we seek to live our lives in our homes and families. We need this grace in all our concerns in the church of God. We need this grace when we are reading God’s holy Word. We need this grace to uphold us, to preserve us continually. We need this grace to be with our spirit, at all times, every moment of our lives, in our spiritual conflict and warfare and pilgrimage, in all the exhortations the Lord gives us. We need this grace to live and we need this grace to die.

There is one word I used to look at years ago which does not seem to be much quoted or much spoken from today. But it seems to be such an emphatic word: “And God is able to make all grace abound toward you: that ye, always having all sufficiency in all things.” It is an emphatic word, isn’t it? *All* grace. *All* sufficiency. At *all* times. In *all* things. “My grace is sufficient for thee.” So do not let us be so swallowed up with the things that trouble us and burden us day by day. We are bidden to set our affections on things above, to walk worthy. “My grace is sufficient for thee.” The whole of your Christian lives, the whole of your Christian profession. “My grace is sufficient for thee” now and “My grace is sufficient for thee” tomorrow, and “My grace is sufficient for thee” in every step of the unknown way. It always will be.

The great point about the all-sufficiency of grace is this: it can never be exhausted. There is always more to follow. There is sufficient grace for today’s need, spiritually or providentially, but there will always be sufficient grace for tomorrow’s need. It is like the manna in the wilderness. When they came there, in the path of their pilgrimage, not knowing what lay before, there the manna fell. There was sufficient for all the Israelites all the forty years in the wilderness, but they did not get it

all at once. “My grace is sufficient for thee.” Grace to live, grace to die, special grace in that specially trying hour. But it is like the manna. You will not have a stock of grace in your heart. That is why so often we are afraid. We look to tomorrow, to the unknown way. Where is the grace? “My grace is sufficient for thee.” It is like Elijah at the widow-woman’s house, the barrel of meal, the cruse of oil. It was all-sufficient. They did not have any stock in hand. They did not have tomorrow’s stock in hand until tomorrow came. But it did not fail. It is “Jehovah Jireh, the Lord will provide.” It is, “My God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus.” May some of you today sweetly be enabled to sing,

“My every need He richly will supply,
Nor will His mercy ever let me die.
In Him there dwells a treasure all divine,
And matchless grace has made that treasure mine.”

“My grace is sufficient for thee.” It is the all-sufficiency of it. It can never diminish. It can never be exhausted. It is an ever-flowing stream. It “sufficed the saints of old, it made them strong, and made them bold.” It is not any the less. The Lord may enrich you by giving it, but He is none the poorer Himself. O that fulness of grace in the Lord Jesus! “For it pleased the Father” – it was His eternal good pleasure – “It pleased the Father that in Him” – His beloved Son – “should all fulness dwell.”

“As Jesus, in covenant love, did engage,
A fulness of grace to display,
The powers of darkness in malice may rage,
The righteous shall hold on his way.”

“My grace is sufficient for thee.” It is not only the fulness of it, that it can never be exhausted, but grace is mightier than all the power of sin. Grace is mightier than all the temptations of Satan. It is unfailing grace. It is grace that never will, never can fail. “My grace is sufficient for thee.” It is divine grace. He says, “It is Mine.” It is the grace of God. “My grace is sufficient for thee.” And because it is divine grace, it is almighty: almighty to uphold and support, to deal with your case, to answer your prayers, to supply your needs. And it is suitable grace, just what you want, just what you need. Like the good Samaritan, it comes right where you are.

Well, may God Himself speak this word to some of you this morning. Then you will not want any more. Your cup will be full. Your cup will be running over. “And He said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee.” That is better than removing the thorn in the flesh. That is better than giving you a life free from trouble. You may say, “But why do these disappointments come? Why does trouble come in my life? Why is it that the world can go on and do things and all goes right, and with the people of God everything seems to go wrong, the Lord crosses them and disappoints them? Why is it?” Well, here God Himself in His infinite wisdom gives the answer to that question. Because God has not promised you two heavens, and here below there is that way of tribulation you have to know. But it is all to this great end, that you might blessedly prove the all-sufficiency of God’s grace.

“And He said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for My strength is made perfect in weakness. It is divine strength; it is divine grace. You may feel that this is rather a peculiar word – not the promise of divine strength, that is so sweet, so attractive – but “My strength is made perfect in weakness.” How can God’s almighty power be made perfect? Surely it *is* perfect. Surely everything with God is perfect. Now I have always looked at it like this. There may be a very eminent surgeon and he may discover a most wonderful remedy, a wonderful cure. If no-one has the malady, no-one has the disease, that doctor is unknown and it means that his wonderful discovery has been just a waste of time. But then a dreadful epidemic springs up and one after another are dying through the terrible malady and the doctor produces his discovery. It is only through the appearance of that awful malady that he gains his fame, he gains his reputation, that the wonderful remedy seems to be so good, that it is made a blessing, he is honoured for it. His discovery was perfect before, but it is displayed in curing all these maladies. Now God’s strength is always perfect, but when this soul is so brought down and weakened, knows his complete and utter helplessness, it is this: “My strength is made perfect in weakness.” Some of you may be weak bodily. Some of you may be weak in spirit. Many of you will be weak in soul.

There is, of course, another side to it. The people that God uses, He empties them, He lays them low, He prostrates them, He brings them to feel that they have nothing, they are nothing; and then He blesses them and

uses them. So it was with Elijah in the Old Testament. So it is with Paul in the New Testament. Paul was brought in a thousand ways to know and feel and acknowledge his weakness, and then God used and honoured him and blessed him above measure.

“My strength is made perfect in weakness.” How does the Lord make His strength perfect in weakness? One thing is keeping you from falling. He is “able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy.” Another way is to uphold you and support you in the time of sorrow. Another is making a way of escape, delivering you, bringing you out of your troubles and through them. “My strength is made perfect in weakness.” But beloved friends, it is when you need it. “Thy shoes shall be iron and brass; and as thy days, so shall thy strength be.”

I did not read the rest of the verse, did I? It is some of the highest language in Scripture. We have to say as Paul himself did on one occasion, “Not as though I had already attained.” “Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.” In other words Paul says, “I feel so weak, I have so many things to distress me, so much trouble, but I am going to submit, I am going to acquiesce, I am going to rejoice in it because it is God’s will.” That is high ground. I do not think many attain to it. But may we ever seek a spirit of submission, knowing that God’s ways are right, God’s ways are best. And may we be brought to that point, to acquiesce: “O bend my will to Thine.” May there be seasons, even though they be few, when we can gladly rejoice in infirmities. But very few are there, and then not for long, to take pleasure in infirmities, gladly to glory in infirmities. Well if we know it, it must be this same rich, divine, all-sufficient grace. But may you go home to live on it and to prove it and to hang on it and lean on it and to prove that it is what God Himself says, “all-sufficient grace.” “And He said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for My strength is made perfect in weakness.”