

*God's
Abundance for
our Sufficiency*



All Scripture quotes are taken from the New King James Version, unless otherwise stated.

1. *Spiritual sufficiency in our service*

The guests at table finishing their meal were taken by surprise. Whatever could the little boy mean? He'd just asked if he could have 'some fishint'. The hostess scratched her head - some what? She was puzzled by this request, until it dawned on her that only a minute or two earlier she'd asked everyone if they'd had 'sufficient' to eat. All the adults had gratefully replied 'yes' - leaving the youngster to think that he'd missed out on something!

In this booklet we're going to focus on Paul's second Bible letter to the Corinthians. We will trace a couple of important words in that letter which was written to the early Church of God at Corinth. One of those is the little boy's word: 'sufficient'. Paul uses it in three separate sections of his letter - and it seems to me as though we could label the things he talks about as spiritual sufficiency, financial sufficiency and physical sufficiency.

Another word that appears again and again (in various forms) is the word 'abundance' or 'abounding'. Proverbs 28:20 says that a faithful person shall abound with

blessings. Have you ever tried to count your many blessings, as the old hymn suggests? You can't do it, can you? There are simply too many. That's exactly what 'abundance' means: something that's 'beyond measure'. If you use a modern translation of the Bible you might not find the word 'abundance', but you'll certainly find lots of expressions like 'immeasurable' or 'beyond measure'.

As you read through Second Corinthians, you'll find that God's grace and comfort are among the things that are said to abound. And when we want to look for

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more abounding things, we need look no further than Christian joy and love, which have their source in God, of course. It all seems designed to teach us - through the experiences recorded in this letter - that God's abundance is for our sufficiency - and that's something that holds good in our service, in our stewardship and in our sufferings.

Let's begin our look at the first of these: God's abundance for our **sufficiency in our spiritual service**. As early as chapter two verse fifteen we read:

'We are to God the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing. To the one we are the aroma of death leading to death, and to the other the aroma of life leading to life. And who is sufficient for these things?'

This is our introduction to our subject of sufficiency- and it's in the context of reaching out to others with God's good news. The question: 'Who is sufficient for these things?' is associated with telling the good news of Jesus - and no wonder! Who hasn't met with apathy, or worse: antagonism, when attempting to share something of God's great love with family, friends, colleagues or neighbours? I can remember times spent taking the gospel from door to door when the whole time seemed to be without a single

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positive reaction.

Yet so often, as one door closes another opens. That had been Paul's experience, too, and he traced God's leading in it - always leading him in triumph in Christ (v.14). So to his own question: 'Who is sufficient for these things?', Paul gives the resounding answer in chapter 3 verse 5 that 'our sufficiency is from God'. Let's read all he says:

'Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as being from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God, who also made us sufficient as ministers of the new covenant.'

So this is spiritual sufficiency - a sufficiency in, and for, our service for God - God making us sufficient as ministers of the new covenant, and doing it out of His own abounding grace.

To explain how it works, Paul contrasts Moses' work for God long ago with our evangelism in new covenant times - since the death of Christ, in other words. Moses once (Numbers 11:14) said to God: *'I am not able to bear all these people alone'*. Since the number of

the people he'd led out of Egypt might have been anything up to 2 million in number, he was right. God never expected Moses to bear all these people by himself. Paul had learned the secret when he says: *'I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me'* (Philippians 4:13). How often we tend to rely on ourselves instead of on the Lord!

Let's try to learn Paul's secret of knowing God's abundance rather than our own self-sufficiency - and to begin by going back to his reference to Moses in chapter 3. Remember how Moses used to put a veil over his face after meeting with God? The skin of his face used to shine from his having been in the presence of God. But with time that reflected glory faded and the veil he was wearing prevented the people seeing that decreasing glory. Why does Paul remind us of this? Well, he's teaching us that when we were still unsaved we had a veil over - not our face, but our heart - a veil which hindered us from seeing the Saviour. But, in the working of God's Spirit, that veil was removed at the time of our conversion. And the removal of this restriction is the work of the Holy Spirit - he's the one who gives us freedom.

Paul writes: *'When one turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. Now the Lord is the Spirit; and*

where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty' - that's verse 17 of this chapter, 2 Corinthians three. This liberty is something that's often misunderstood. It seems the weirdest things are sometimes done under the pretext of being 'in the Spirit'. But the liberating work of the Holy Spirit here is a process of change which He works in us - a change towards Christ-likeness - which at the same time will be a change away from self-sufficiency. The Spirit works to free us from relying on ourselves.

Chapter 4 verse 6 says: *'God ... commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.'* Just as the people looked on Moses' face long ago, we're to look upon the

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Lord's face. How do we do that? It's by reading the Bible, and the Lord being revealed to us through it. Christ is revealed to us by the illumination of the Spirit.

Even that's not change as such - there's more - more than being revealed 'to' us, God's purpose is for Christ to be revealed 'in' us as we become not just illuminated, but imitators of Christ. Chapter 3:18 says: *'we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord'*. The mirror is the Word of God which we look into to see the glory of the Lord. It's by 'beholding' that we're 'transformed' - a liberating change from self-sufficiency into Christlikeness. In the process we become more aware of God's abundant sufficiency for our service.

But it's a gradual process, and when our thirst for the Lord and His Word are not what they could be it gets hindered - but how wonderful that it's a change 'from

glory to glory'. I wouldn't want to swap places with Moses in this respect - for his experience was of a decreasing glory, as the shining of his face faded away over time. What's open to us is the experience of an increasing glory - increasing Christlikeness - changed by one glorious degree to another. It's not hard to see how all this relates to the original context of evangelism. As more of the attractiveness of Christ is seen in our lives, it will surely have the effect of others being attracted to Him through us - and all by the sufficiency that's from God! By people reading the gospel in our lives: - when we become the 'living epistles' Paul's been speaking about earlier in the same chapter - we really can be effective in our service as 'ministers of the new covenant' - even when we're up against pressures, disappointments and opposition just like Paul and his co-workers faced in this letter. Like them, we can overcome by His abundance of grace, comfort, love and joy.

2. *Financial sufficiency in our stewardship*

'God's abundance for our sufficiency' is our subject, and it's taken from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. In this section, we're focusing on **sufficiency in stewardship** and we'll be looking into chapters 8 and 9, if you have your Bible handy.

Paul starts by saying to the believers at Corinth: *'We make known to you the grace of God bestowed on the churches of Macedonia: that in a great trial of affliction the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty abounded in the riches of their liberality.'*

In a sense, we're beginning where we left off our look at 'sufficiency in service': on the theme of Christlikeness. The generosity of the Macedonians in their stewardship gives us a very clear glimpse of Christ in them. Isn't it delightful that here, where we get one of the most precious revelations of the grace of the Lord Jesus, it's occasioned by the generous giving of these Macedonian believers?

The grace of God in them had brought them to full surrender, seen in giving themselves to the

Lord. The affliction they'd experienced had only served to intensify their joy. In the midst of their deep poverty, they displayed great generosity. Surrender, joy and generosity: these characteristics in their lives turn our attention to the Lord Jesus. *'The grace of the one man, Jesus Christ'* (Romans 5) produced perfect lifelong surrender to the will of His God and Father. Even though, as the psalmist had predicted, *'He was afflicted from His youth up'*, His surrender wasn't accompanied by grim determination. No, the joy of the Lord was His strength as He headed onwards to the cross. The One who borrowed a manger, a boat, a penny, a donkey and a tomb, was the same One who never sent anyone away empty.

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So, we owe a great debt to the Macedonians - for their obedient confession of the gospel of Christ - because their outstanding generosity brings us the verse about *'the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich.'* I hope it whets our appetite so that in our lives, too, Christ might be clearly expressed. On the matter of stewardship, it's quite a challenge to ask ourselves if we're at the Macedonian level of giving or at the Corinthian level. The Corinthians were full of good intentions but were a bit backward when it came to actually going through with it.

By contrast, the Macedonians were gracious givers. Paul writes of the grace of God that had been given in the churches of Macedonia - and that grace was their spirit of generosity. They abounded in that grace unlike the Corinthians (see 8:7). True, the Corinthians abounded in other things like faith and knowledge, but they hadn't yet appreciated that generous

stewardship is a mark of Christian character. Generous giving to the Lord is an evidence of God's transforming work in our hearts - a change towards Christlikeness and away from self-sufficiency. It's no coincidence that it is these Macedonian believers, transformed to be like Christ, who model for us the reality of God's sufficiency in stewardship. Despite the fact that they themselves didn't have much of this world's goods, they reflected God's own generous, giving nature by being more concerned for others than for themselves.

It was in this that they gave a practical demonstration of their likeness to Christ. He gave Himself, and He gave entirely. He gave voluntarily, and He gave willingly. So did the Macedonians. In forfeiting much-needed cash, they made life harder for themselves, and in this sacrificial sense they gave themselves to the Lord. It wasn't just the money they gave, but it was also the comfort and relief they could have bought with it had they not given it. They willingly made a personal sacrifice by depriving themselves; and the deprivation was real enough, for we read of their deep poverty.

It's precisely this readiness to give that's stressed in verses 11 and 12 of chapter 8 as one of the great principles of our steward-

ship; Paul says to the Corinthians: *'but now you must complete the doing of it; that as there was a readiness to desire it, so there also may be a completion out of what you have. For if there is first a willing mind, it is accepted according to what one has, and not according to what he does not have.'* Our readiness to forfeit the full personal benefit of our income is the measure of the manifestation of this grace of giving in our experience.

Let's explore further the link between God's abundance and our sufficiency in stewardship by turning our attention to 2 Corinthians chapter 9 verses 8 to 10:

'And God is able to make all grace abound toward you, that you, always having all sufficiency in all things, may have an abundance for every good work. As it is written: "He has dispersed abroad, He has given to the poor; His righteousness endures forever." Now may He who supplies seed to the sower, and bread for food, supply and multiply the seed you have sown and increase the fruits of your righteousness.'

We sing about God's 'amazing grace', don't we? But these verses are talking about God's abounding grace! This is certainly the source of our sufficiency in stewardship. The word 'sufficiency' was actually

used, wasn't it? God's Word spoke about our *'always having all sufficiency in all things'*. It's every bit as clear in chapter 9 regarding our stewardship as it was in chapter 3 regarding our service that *'our sufficiency is from God'*.

What abundance lies behind this sufficiency! Think about it once more: ALWAYS having ALL sufficiency in ALL things. Not sometimes in some things, but always in all things. Wonderful as this is, let's not get carried away with some false idea that God's plan is for Him to be forever indulging His children. These verses are much loved by present-day advocates of the so-called 'prosperity gospel' which says: 'God wants you rich'.

This is not a promise that if we give to God, then He'll give us back much more wealth for our own ends. The sense here is that if we sow sparingly (if we don't give much) we'll not be instrumental in bringing much blessing to the lives of others. Bountiful givers will reap, in the sense that their giving will bear fruit in the lives of the recipients. It's totally out of character to see this passage as in any way

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supporting self-seeking giving. The intention is to bless others, to look for a great harvest of blessing in the lives of others, and not for our own financial reward.

God promises to provide our sufficiency out of His abundance - always, in everything - so that we, in turn, might bless others generously. Paul says: *'may He who supplies seed to the sower, and bread for food, supply and multiply the seed you have sown and increase the fruits of your righteousness'*. In other words, God's sufficient supply to us serves to fulfil two things. First of all, He gives 'bread for food': that's God's supply for our own domestic requirements. For we need to maintain an efficient lifestyle ourselves in order to be effective in service. Our heavenly Father knows this and supplies every need of ours *'according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus'* (see Philippians chapter 4).

Secondly, as mentioned here, God, as well as giving 'bread for food', also gives 'seed for sowing'. Perhaps this is a stranger form of words and we need to take a little more time over it. In this section, giving to God is called 'sowing'. It might be meeting someone else's material needs as part of our 'stewardship'. God promises, in His abounding grace, to supply us, not only with 'bread for food' to cater for our own modest needs, but to

bless us with the means to make contributions and donations wherever necessary. If we do this, as intended, rather than hoarding up the surplus for ourselves, we'll *'abound in every good work'*. So despite all that the 'prosperity preachers' tell us, when God multiplies our seed it's not for hoarding, but for sowing, in order to reap a harvest of blessing in the lives of others.

Lastly, there are two words in this section worth a mention. They're 'bountifully' and 'liberality'. In some versions at least, the donation coming from the Corinthians is spoken of as their 'bounty' (9:5). That literally means a 'spoken benediction'. It reminds us that what we give is more than what it's worth in purely financial terms, it's a token of our conferred goodwill; it's an expression of love. We bless with our gifts.

The other word, 'liberality', has the idea of 'singleness'. At first, the idea of singleness seems totally unrelated to the business of giving. But Jesus taught that no-one can serve two masters: certainly not God and money. 'Singleness' in this sense means freedom from the double-mindedness that would taint our giving with selfish motivation. When we give 'with singleness' we're not looking for a pay-off ourselves.

3. *Physical sufficiency in our sufferings*

We're still exploring Second Corinthians under the theme of 'God's abundance for our sufficiency'. It's a theme that suggests itself directly from Scripture because, in 3 separate sections in this letter by Paul, he uses the word 'sufficiency' in the context of our service, stewardship and suffering. That is, he uses it in ways that might be described as having spiritual, financial and physical aspects. The background to it all is the recurring evidence of God's abundance that's given to us in this letter: His abounding comfort and grace; His abounding love and joy.

The key passage we come to now is in 2 Corinthians 12 where Paul, it seems, shares something of a vision he'd had. He spoke of *'how he was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words'* and then he goes on in verse 7 to explain that to prevent him being *'exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations'* a thorn in the flesh was given to him. He says *'concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And He said to me, "My grace*

is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness."

This is really quite a fascinating insight into God's dealings with His servant, including how it shows that God's sovereign purposes allow and use hindrances that Satan harnesses in our lives. Satan really has power to affect our physical well-being, and what he does is calculated to be harmful. But God is over all, setting the limits and using for our greater good whatever Satan maliciously intends. Some have thought that Paul's physical handicap was poor eyesight, judging from what he said about the Galatians (4:15), that they would have plucked out their own eyes and done him a swop. Perhaps, however, it's left vague so that we can relate any of our chronic complaints to it. Whatever it may have been, it's clear is the blessing that flowed from this was Paul's humility.

It's hard not to make a comparison with the story of Job. Remember how God allowed Satan to wreak havoc with Job? His possessions, family and personal health were plundered or destroyed. This

happened, not because Job was sinning, but because he was righteous. God knew what Job was made of; whereas Satan had him figured all wrong. If you read the 42 chapters that are devoted to this one individual's suffering, you'll never read that it was ever revealed to Job why he had to go through all that pain. What's clear, however, is that he emerged from this test with a much greater sense of God. *'I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees You'* (Job 42:5). Changed attitudes and perspectives can be more satisfying than answers and instant relief - seems to be the message of Job.

That's also the way Paul viewed it. He spoke about preferring to *'take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake'*. It's as though he got to the point where he says that he wouldn't have done without the discomfort, since that would have meant also doing without the grace and sense of God's sufficiency. This is the God who, 31 times in the book of Job, is described by the title 'Shaddai' which basically means 'sufficiency'. The message is: God is our sufficiency. Out of God's abounding grace, Job and Paul found a real sense of **sufficiency**, sustaining them **through physical suffering**.

Not all of us, thankfully, are called upon to suffer anything like as much as Job or Paul, but equally, because we live in a fallen world, we'll never be completely immune from pain and discomfort. Romans chapter 8 describes our situation by saying that the whole creation groans in pain and even we groan within ourselves. This groaning is the result of God having subjected this world to a curse: the very one we can read about in the first book of the Bible. Corruption and decay were not part of the original design of the universe. They came about when God subjected the creation to futility as a judgement upon our first parents' disobedience.

There's a sense in which we all suffer as a result of the curse of Genesis chapter 3 - with a pain that's not always physical, but very real. In a fallen world, hurts and disappointments are inevitable. How do we respond to them? One way people react is by denying them, or seeking to defend against them at all costs. Perhaps, they think these things shouldn't happen to a committed Christian and so they struggle with guilt feelings. Yet God hasn't promised us physical comfort now, and Paul both acknowledged these things in his life, and went so far as to rejoice in them. According to his testimony, they worked in him to make his passion for Christ more

acute. Why is it that pain and frustration are unavoidable? Let me remind you of our early history:

We were made in the *'image of God'*, Genesis tells us. That included the ability to be creative; perhaps at first expressed in the way Adam cultivated and kept the Garden of Eden, for that was the specific task allotted to him. Next, we read about God's verdict on Adam when He said in Genesis 2: *'It is not good that man should be alone'*. In other words we were designed for partnership - and so Eve was formed. The highlight of their time in the Garden must have been when they knew the presence and voice of the Lord God as He came to meet and walk with them in the cool of the day. We were built for fellowship with our Maker. Now, because of the way we've been created, it's only natural for each of us to want to be comfortable and enjoy the satisfaction of a job well done. It's equally natural to long for the pleasure of excellent relationships and for deep spiritual experiences with God.

But also, because of the fact that this world was cursed through our first parents' rebellion, it's natural for us, in a now fallen and imperfect world, to groan with the pain of disappointment when things don't go well, when relationships sour and whenever

we feel far away from God. After all, we weren't designed for ground with weeds, for relationships with strains and for fellowship with interruptions. Ever since Eden, we thirst for the way things were at the very beginning.

The Bible recognizes our thirst. In Jeremiah 2:13 we hear God saying: *'My people have committed two evils: they have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, and hewn themselves cisterns - broken cisterns that can hold no water.'* Often, like Israel, we try to satisfy our thirst by our own independent, self-sufficient strategies.

For example, when we suffer disappointment in some relationship quite early in life, we feel pain, and we instinctively demand pain relief. We decide we're not going to allow ourselves to be hurt that way again. Gradually and subtly, we develop a self-protecting way of relating to other people. It may be that my efficiency is my way of preventing

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close, tender relationships forming, because I know they leave me vulnerable to being hurt. Or it may be that my shyness is my way of avoiding embarrassment and loss of image. If I've once known the pain of feeling rejected, the chances are I'll not risk letting anyone know what I'm really like for fear that then they wouldn't want to know me. All that is an attempt to be self-sufficient in dealing with the rejections and pain that are inevitable for anyone in a fallen world.

In other words, by using strategies like these (the 'broken cisterns' to use the prophet's words) I'm putting my own interests first; I'm loving myself more than anyone else. Basically, the Bible says that's wrong behaviour. That's manipulation, not ministry. That's not what Paul was all about. He'd known more than his fair share of things appearing to go wrong; of disappointment in relationships with co-workers; and in Romans chapter 7 he talks candidly of spiritual failure and wretchedness. But he'd grasped the secret of deep trust in God's gracious sufficiency through it all: depending on God's sufficiency, and not on his own strategy.

How can we know this type of sufficiency? Perhaps Paul would say that we first need to face up

to our disappointments, feel the pain, and let the pain drive us to God. Surely it was precisely Paul's thirst that whetted his passion for Christ - to the point of even finding pleasure in pain through the richer experience of the Lord to which it brought him. When the Lord Jesus promised *'living water'* to thirsty people in John 4:10 and 7:37, He wasn't promising the removal of all disappointments (not yet, at least) that belongs to Heaven, but He was offering hope whenever we hurt. It's thirst-quenching whenever we remind ourselves of the value God puts on each one of us; when we remember that we're loved by Him with a love we can never lose; and especially when we realize that there's something significant planned by God for each one of us to do for Him. As we allow God's grace to change us to become deeply dependent on His sufficiency, we find ourselves set free to truly love, even when we're hurting. We all want successful careers, loving partners, money and well-behaved children, but if and when they don't materialize, we need not be crushed if we bring the thirst of our legitimate longings, and the hurt of our painful disappointments, to the Lord. By His grace, we trust and hope in Him at a deep level for His sufficiency.

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