

2 Corinthians 8 (Part 1): 1-5 • Grace that Enables

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2 Corinthians chapter 8. It says,

“We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, ² for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. ³ For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, ⁴ begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints— ⁵ and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us.” (ESV)

I want you to stop there if you would please. Let's pray.

Lord, it's now that we come to you and we ask Your Holy Spirit to open our hearts and minds to the wisdom of Your Word. A work that Lord only You can do, because You're the One who opens our hearts. You're the One who turns the light on so that we can see, and as we get into these verses and unpack them this morning, we pray that you would do just that, and that you would incline our hearts to a place of understanding, and then application. We ask it in Jesus name, amen.

You'll notice, for those of you that have been following our study here in 2 Corinthians, that Paul changes gears here a little bit and he starts off by talking about the churches in Macedonia. In case you're not familiar, that would be northern Greece, and that would encompass the churches of Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea.

Those are churches where that Paul had planted previously, and now he's talking about those churches, so as to brag about them a little bit, and he wants to tell the people in Corinth about what had happened among those churches, and particularly the support that those people had come forth with. to help the believers in Judea.

Let me give you a little back story. There had been a famine that had come upon the land, a fairly severe famine and so the believers were putting together relief offerings, and we know what that's all about. I'm willing to bet that several of you have probably sent money recently to Texas, maybe to the Houston area because of the terrible flooding and, oh I guess it's going to be years. Have you seen pictures of all the people's stuff from their houses just taken out, put in the street that's just wrecked and people's homes?

We've got friends and family from the body here that live down in the Houston area, and we've been getting reports, and it's been just tragic to hear about it, but what's really been cool is that we've seen a lot of people really rally to send money and help and support to the people down there in Texas because they really need it.

So, this kind of relief effort type stuff has been going on for a long time. We've been doing it here most recently because of a hurricane. They were doing it because of a famine, and this particular famine was one that had actually been predicted beforehand through the Spirit, and we read about that in the book of Acts. Let me put that on the screen for you so we can see it together. It is from Acts chapter 11, and it says,

Acts 11:27-29 (ESV)

“Now in these days prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. And one of them named Agabus stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world (this took place in the days of Claudius). So the disciples determined, every one according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea.”

“Now in these days prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. And one of them named Agabus stood up and foretold by (or through) the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world (and then Luke who's the consummate historian goes on to say parenthetically that this actually took place during the days of Claudius Caesar, and then it tells us that the disciples, because of this prophecy, actually) made a determination, according to their ability, to send relief to the believers that were living in Judea.”

And that was something that they did. Paul would actually go around and take offerings for, not for himself, but for the church in Jerusalem, particularly in that area of Judea, which apparently had been hit hardest by this particular famine. So, we're looking at these first 5 verses where Paul is talking about how the Macedonian church has actually gathered support for doing that, and you

might be thinking to yourself, Well, pastor Paul, that's interesting, but it's fairly ordinary.

I mean, good grief. We see people doing it today, and as I just mentioned, and by the way, Calvary Chapel, Ontario also from your offerings made a donation down to the work, the relief effort going on down there in Houston as well. Just want to let you know that, but this stuff happens it happens pretty regularly when there are catastrophic sorts of things that take place in the world.

So, you might be wondering here, why are we even talking about this because it's a fairly ordinary thing. Well, if we look a little bit deeper into these verses, I think you're going to see that actually what happened in these circumstances was not ordinary, it was extraordinary, and if you'll look with me again at verse 1, we'll start to unpack these verses a little bit, and I think you'll see it.

Paul begins in verse 1 again by saying, “*We want you to know, brothers, (look at this) about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia.*” Please notice here that Paul doesn't begin this statement by saying, brothers, I want you to know about how incredibly cool the people in Macedonia are. Those churches in Thessalonica and Berea and Philippi, man, I tell you, those guys, they really did something.

He didn't start that way. Did you notice that? He begins by saying, I want you to know about the grace of God. That's how it begins. In fact, we're going to see here that God's grace is the focus of what Paul is saying in these verses. In fact, throughout the next couple of chapters, no, the next four chapters, in fact, Paul is going to bring a crescendo of understanding about grace, as we get to the later chapters here in second Corinthians, and it's going to be beautiful and we'll have a lot more to say about it at that point.

But he says here, I want you to know about the grace of God. Now, the grace of God was something that had been bestowed to the believers in Macedonia and it had a result. And the result of the grace of God that was bestowed upon the believers in Macedonia, was that they gave a donation toward the relief effort that was going on because of the famine. Now, but this is where it gets interesting.

Normally we wouldn't make a big deal of people making a donation. Big deal, it's like we do it all the time, but obviously there's something different about this, or Paul wouldn't be making such a big deal about it, and that something special is communicated to us in verse 2. So, look with me there. He says, “*For*

in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity.”

I wanted to read those words and emphasize them to you in such a way that you would lay hold of them because there are really four key words that are found in this verse. Let me put them up on the screen for you so you can see them together. They are,

- **Affliction**
- **Poverty**
- **Joy**
- **Generosity**

Now, what do those words have in common? Well, if I was going to group some words together that did have something in common, I'd probably group together **Affliction** and **Poverty**, right? I get that. When people are afflicted with difficult times and so forth sometimes poverty is very much a part of that and we can see and understand how those two words would easily be put in the same sentence.

The other two words that go together are the last ones, **Joy** and **Generosity**. We get that too. When there's overflowing joy, as Paul calls it, sometimes generosity comes out of that, and it's all very cool. So, you can see that affliction and poverty have something in common. Joy and generosity have something in common. But really, affliction really has nothing in common with joy and generosity.

And poverty really has nothing in common with joy and generosity and yet Paul uses all four words with kind of this sort of an attitude where, I don't really care if these words don't go together or if they're contradictory. He's using them together and he says to you and I, this is very important that you get this, in the midst of their affliction, and by the way if you need a little refresher on affliction, let me put the definition up here for you.

af-flic-tion

noun

1) Something that causes pain or suffering.

Affliction means something that causes pain or suffering. So, in the midst of their pain and suffering, these, I mean, this is an awful time. Do you know that

the Greek word that is translated here, affliction, is the same word we translate as, tribulation. And that word in the Greek means distress.

It can be translated anguish, and it can be translated trouble, along with a myriad of other words that we might use in the English, and I trust you don't need a definition for poverty. And yet the apostle Paul says in the midst of that affliction, that trouble, that distress, that stress and difficulty, joy and generosity came bubbling forth, and we look at this and we say, what in the world?

Yeah, see, this is exactly the point of what Paul is saying. This is what makes what he's describing, a work of God's grace, because in this case he's describing something that goes beyond human ability. It goes beyond human limitation, and it places an act, this act of the Macedonian believers squarely in the realm of the power of God. Because you see, the fact is, when you and I are in the midst of a painful affliction that is causing anguish and distress and difficulty and trials and hurt, pain, and then you add on that, on top of that, deep poverty, well, I'll just say this.

You don't usually get joy, overflowing joy and generosity. You just don't get those things unless the power of God; the power of God's Holy Spirit is doing a work of grace. And as I said before, in just 4 chapters from now, Paul's going to build up this idea of grace to a rather climactic finish where he's going to talk about how God's grace is sufficient, and I loved the fact that we sang that in two different songs today. It was beautiful.

Brandon and I had no communication about what we were going to be dealing with, and yet, in the songs we sang about God's sufficiency of grace, and that's what Paul's going to talk about here for the next several chapters. But when the power of the Holy Spirit, listen dear people, when the power of the Holy Spirit is invited into our worst challenges, our toughest battles, our deepest pain, right?

The results are amazing. The results are incredible because it allows you and I, it enables you and I to live in a manner that exceeds our human ability. It transcends our human limitations, right? I want you to notice what Paul says in verses 3 and 4, look with me again in your Bible, it says, *"for they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and he says, beyond their means."* I don't know where this came from, this gift came from, because these people were in dire poverty, and they were under such distress, but look what it goes on to say, he says, ³*"...they gave of their own accord."*

You know what that means? It was their idea. Paul didn't present this idea to the churches in Macedonia. He knew how distressed they were. He knew how much poverty had just ravaged this area and he didn't even bring it up. He says, by their own accord, they not only brought it up themselves, but look what he goes on to say in verse 4.

He says they begged us to get involved. He says in verse 4, *“begging us earnestly for the favor....”* Can you imagine people who are in dire poverty and affliction coming up to you and saying, please let me help. And Paul looks at this and he goes, you know what? That's God. That's a work of God. That's not a work of man. That doesn't happen in the normal sort of human way of doing things, right?

Affliction and poverty don't bring forth the fruit of generosity and joy. These people were joyful, and their joy just sprang forward in this act of generosity and such that Paul was just, this is the work of God's grace. But I want you to see one other thing about this act of the Macedonian believers that's very cool. Paul brings it out here, and it's in verse 5. If you look with me there, it says, *“and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord, and then by the will of God, to us.”*

Now, what Paul's talking about here is he's talking about the priority of our giving. When he says that they first gave themselves to the Lord, and then to us, he's saying, very simply, that they had committed their lives, they'd committed their hearts, first and foremost to the Lord. They'd given their very lives into the hands of God, and so, afterward, after that, they were now free to give themselves to helping with these relief efforts that were going on in Jerusalem.

But the reason they were free to do it, because first, they realized, we belong to the Lord, and all that we have, all that I have, all that I am, belongs to the Lord. Belongs to Him! Right? G. Campbell Morgan. I don't know if you've ever heard of him before, he was a British evangelist. Found a quote.



**"Contributions to the work of the Lord are only valuable as they are the gifts of those who are themselves yielded to God."
—G. Campbell Morgan**

He says, "Contributions to the work of the Lord are only valuable as they are the gifts of those who are themselves yielded to God."

Or I would even say they are the gifts of those who are themselves gifts to God. You see, what Paul is saying here, what G. Campbell Morgan is even expressing is that because the people in Macedonia first yielded themselves to God, the gift was now a work of His grace because they understood they belonged to Him, and that means everything that they had belonged to God.

When you don't, when you don't have that priority of understanding, do you know what happens? Any giving you do is giving my stuff, and that's where we get all hot and bothered when people are always asking us for their money, or our money or my hard earned money, or maybe it's not money maybe it's my time, maybe it's my resources or whatever the thing might be.

Don't you hate it when you're going through the grocery line, and you're getting ready to pay and they say, would you like to get some money to this thing? All right, you know who wants to sound like a cheapskate and go, no. Yeah, all right, but it is never I've never really seen anybody joyfully sort of do that because everybody seems like they're putting the touch on us. You know why that is?

Because what they're asking for is my stuff. My stuff, it's my stuff! So, they need some help down in Houston. Well, I guess I better send some of my stuff down there to Texas to help those people out. Yeah, not very happy about it, but. Do you know what happens when a person comes to the realization that everything they are, everything that they have belongs to God?

It's His stuff. I'm no longer giving my stuff. I'm giving God's stuff, and it's a privilege. It's a favor. Do you understand that the Macedonians begged Paul to let them help. Please let us do this! Their joy overflowed because first, they gave themselves to God and they knew and understood all I have and all I am belongs to Him.

Remember what Paul said in his letter in First Corinthians? Let me put this up on the screen for you. He says,

1 Corinthians 6:19-20 (ESV)

"...You are not your own, for you were bought with a price...."

"...You are not your own, for you were bought with a price...."

The Bible says you were purchased by the, you know what that price was, it was the blood of Christ, right? He bought you, he bought and paid for you, right? With His own blood, now, guess what? You belong to Him. Did you think that didn't involve everything that you have?

Of course it does. If you've been purchased for God, that means you are bought lock, stock, and barrel, right? You belong to the Lord. You know what the bottom line is? It isn't your money! It's His! That car you drive, that's not your car, it's His car! That house you live in! That's His house! Take your hands off it, and when you come to that understanding, as Paul says, where you first give yourself to the Lord, and you understand that you belong to Him, then you give yourself and all of your belongings.

It's easy because this is, God just wants some of my stuff, that's fine He gave it in the first place. Easy come, easy go right? And if I give some of the Lord's stuff, it isn't easy. He can give it back. You know, this is grace. The grace to go beyond our human ability, because these people didn't just give, they gave out of poverty. They didn't just, they weren't just joyful, they were joyful in the midst of affliction, trials, difficulties, pain.

It was through that, that those things came ushering forth and when we talk about grace, we normally talk about grace and we define it as unmerited favor, and it's the element or the dynamic that is part and parcel of our salvation. We say we are saved by grace through faith, and we're talking about that unmerited favor by which we didn't deserve salvation. There's not one person in this room who is saved who deserved to be saved.

It's God's grace that saves us, right? Okay. Let's get that through our heads, right? Well, that's not the grace that Paul's talking about now. Grace has many different kind of understandings, definitions, frankly, in the Word of God. When we talk about this expression of grace, we're talking about grace that enables, or if you will, grace that empowers okay?

When Paul says, I want you to know, brothers, about the grace that came upon the Macedonian believers in their giving, he's talking about the grace that enabled them to give beyond their means, and sometimes we, you'll hear Christians talking about grace in this way. Enabling grace, and they'll talk about how somebody has the grace to do something.

Sometimes they'll talk about how people have, don't have the grace to do something. You know, we had a comment, a comment was made in our staff meeting on Friday about somebody, and I certainly won't mention who it was, but in fact I don't even know who it was, but somebody, some guy had made a comment about working in children's ministry and how it was very difficult for him to work in children's ministry.

In fact, I think there were like adjectives used that made it sound like it was a huge burden. Well, my immediate response to that is, that person didn't have the grace, that person doesn't have the grace for that area of ministry. There's other people who are just given the grace or the ability to work with children in such a way that to them it is a delight, it is their passion, they love it, and stuff.

That's the grace to do something so and we see that and sometimes we'll look at people who are like missionaries, for example, who are living in circumstances that are just like mind-blowingly hard. For me, the definition of mind-blowingly hard would be like no flush toilets or something like that, that's just something that just, yeah, anyway, but there's a lot of people who are living in, they'll go to places in the world and they'll give up their earthly comforts and they'll live among people where there's no running water and their lives are in danger on a regular basis, and you think, what in the world?

Well, they have grace, they have grace from God to be able to do that. We tend to just describe it to the person, they go, well, they really have an adventurous spirit. Well, they got the grace of God to do that and it's when God's grace is on you to do something, it's not hard. It's a delight and that's how the churches in Macedonia could be afflicted and in dire poverty and be pumped beyond imagination at the opportunity to give of their finances.

Grace, and Paul recognized it. The grace that was upon the Macedonian churches was amazing. It was incredible. Right? There is a verse that Christians love to quote. It might have even gone through a few of your minds, as it relates to being able to do things that we otherwise might not be able to do, and it's from Philippians chapter 4. Let me put it on the screen for you. It goes like this.

Philippians 4:13 (ESV)

"I can do all things through Him who strengthens me."

"I can do all things through Him (and that of course is Christ) who strengthens me."

And this verse is quoted a lot, but may I suggest to you that this verse is not a promise that you can do anything. It is a promise that through the strength of God's grace, you can do anything, and there's a difference, but you understand, don't you? That we don't have the grace to do everything. I don't have the grace to do what many of you have the grace to do and vice versa, because God has apportioned His grace according to His own desires and so forth, and He's given gifts of grace for certain people to deal with life and gifting and so on and so forth, but I don't have the grace to do everything.

I can't necessarily quote that passage from Philippians and say, I can do everything. No, I can do anything that He gives me the grace to do, but I'm not gifted to do everything. That's why we need every one of us in the body of Christ. It's a promise to us that through the strength of God's grace, His enabling grace, that we can do anything He calls us to do. Not that we can do everything. I can do everything. No, I can't do everything, but I can do anything He calls me to, and He gives me the grace to do right, and so can you.

It's not a blanket promise, but it is a promise that God's grace is able, God's grace is sufficient as we sang today in that beautiful, lovely song that we actually, a couple of them where we talked about God's sufficiency of grace. Now, let me ask you a question, and the question is this: have you ever experienced the kind of grace from God that enables you to do something that is beyond your human limitations?

I dare say there's a pretty healthy number of believers today who have never experienced that kind of grace. They're saved. Saving grace, oh yeah, no problem there. But enabling grace, empowering grace, that's a different animal, and I think the reason why many believers have not experienced that ability to go beyond our human limitation is because we don't often go beyond our human

limitations. And when we do, rather than turning to the power of God, we turn to other things.

We turn to the world for answers. We turn to any number of other solutions, rather than turning to God and having an expectation, that since I'm walking through this situation He's going to give me the grace to walk through this situation. We don't have an expectation many times, and when we are confronted by the grace of God which enables, beyond our human ability, we're surprised! We're surprised!

We're going through a very difficult tragedy and we're saying, I have joy and I don't know why, and sometimes we even feel a little guilty. I don't think I should be joyful. I don't think this is the thing people get joyful about, and yet I've got joy in my heart. How is that possible? It's the grace of God. We often go to people who are going through some of the most difficult tragedies that life can dole out, and we go with the intention of comforting them.

Have you ever done this, and you walk away comforted? This has happened to me so many times as a pastor. It's like, they have a tragedy or something going on, okay, I got to, I'm going to go there, and I'm going to just do my best to bring some comfort, and I walk away, and they pumped me up. They were just, they were so walking in the grace of God for that, in the midst of that situation, they were just like God is so good and He's able, and He's going to, He's going to bring me through this time.

We look at things that other people are going through and we think, oh man I could never deal with that. I could never deal with oh, just oh and we'll sometimes even fret about the possibility of something like that happening when we see it happen to someone else that we know or love or hear about and we're like oh, man, I could just but what you, if you've never had that happen, you don't understand or God doesn't give the grace to go through something before that something comes along.

That's the part we don't get. Grace comes when we need it, and the reason that Paul talks so much about grace in his letters is because he constantly found himself in a place where he needed it and where he embraced it. Paul constantly found himself beyond his human limitations. Constantly. In fact, do you guys remember how he started this letter?

Way back in chapter 1, he starts off, one of the first things he says toward the end of chapter one is, brothers, we don't want you to be uninformed about the hardships that we suffered in the province of Asia. Let me tell you, it was so

bad, it was beyond our ability to endure. Did you catch that? It was beyond our ability to endure.

In fact, Paul goes on to say, we felt the sentence of death, which is a very poetic way of saying we believed that was it. We believed that we were going to die. Have you ever been there? They really literally thought death was right around the corner. But then he goes on to talk about how God delivered them. But then he went on to say this. This happened so that we might not rely on ourselves, but on God who raises the dead.

So, God's grace comes at that time when we are going through something that literally is pressing us beyond our human capability. But His grace comes to enable us to stand up under it, but not just stand. To stand victoriously. To stand joyfully, and to do things that are beyond our human ability, such as overflowing generosity in the midst of dire poverty, and that's the point.

What these people displayed was not human. It was God. It was divine. It was literally a work of God in their lives, which is why Paul begins this chapter by saying, man let me tell you about the grace of God that was displayed most recently in the Christians in Macedonia. Let me tell you how hard their situation was, how challenging their circumstances were, and yet how joyful they were in the midst of them, and how generous they acted in the midst of those things.

Now, I know that some of you guys are going through really, really hard times. Some of you are going through really stressful situations, and some of you are being pressed beyond your human ability, and then somebody comes along and says, God will never give you more than you can bear, and you know that's not true. It's not true. It doesn't say that in the Bible.

God will allow in your life things that are beyond your ability to endure, as Paul says in 2 Corinthians chapter 1, however, His grace is sufficient. So, what's the key? What's the secret to experiencing His power? Well, here it is, guys. I've got to get weak. What we're going to see, the crescendo, the climax that Paul's going to bring us to in about four chapters.

In chapter 12 is he's going to talk about his own life and some very severe difficulty that he was enduring and how he even cried out to God to be delivered from it, and the Lord finally said no, but the Lord said this, *"my grace is sufficient for you."* (2 Corinthians 12:9) Just like we sang this morning. But then the Lord went on to tell Paul the secret to walking in His grace, and it's this, *"My power is made perfect in your weakness."*

See, that's why we don't experience God's grace sometimes in the midst of our own difficulties because we try to be strong. We're trying to do it ourselves, we're trying to fix it or return to the world for some sort of an answer, and we don't rely on God, we don't get weak, or if it's, or if it's some area of sin in our lives that just keeps knocking us down, we just think, I just need to grit my teeth and that's about the time we start making promises to God.

God I'm not going to let that happen anymore. I'm tired of that sin, and I'm just, you get mad at yourself. You ever done that sort of a thing when you either yell at somebody or you something, some area of just, you just fleshed out and you afterwards, there's so much regret and you're like, I'm not going to let that happen again. Oh, yes, you will. You know what's going to make the difference?

You come to God and say, I can't do this. I don't have the power to overcome this area of sin in my life. I don't have the power to be joyful in the midst of these circumstances. I don't have the power to transcend what I am going through right now in my life, but You do. Your grace is sufficient for all things, and You can enable me, and I know how. It's by me getting weak and saying, Lord, I can't do this. I can't do it.

That's not an admission of defeat in your Christian life. It's a yielding to the power of the Holy Spirit to come and do what He does best, which is to take a weak person and give you His strength. Lord, I need you. I need Your strength. I need Your power, because I just don't have it. I don't have the goods. I'm sorry. I don't have what it takes.

The people in Macedonia did not have what it took for overflowing joy and abundant generosity to come shining forth from their circumstances. They didn't have it. That's why Paul starts off by saying, brothers, let me tell you about the grace of God, and the reason he wanted to tell them about the grace of God is because the grace of God is available to all of us without exception.

It's available to you, today. It's available to me. If we'll just be smart enough to get off our personal high horse and get weak before God and admit to Him, I can't do this, but You can. Good grief, we were taught to sing as children. They are weak, but He is strong. How come that lyric never got through our heads and really planted itself in a really useful and practical way? Maybe we need to go back and start singing Jesus Loves Me again. And start putting in, I am weak, but you are strong.

Yes, Jesus loves me.