

**SERMON – 27 August 2017: Rev Dr Brenda Robson**

**“MY GRACE IS SUFFICIENT FOR YOU”**

**Psalm 31: 1–5**

**2 Corinthians 12:1–10**

**The Lord said, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”**

I shared with the Guild at their Communion service on Tuesday evening the story of Joni Eareckson.

It is appropriate to speak of her today because it is exactly 50 years since she had her life changing accident. Joni is now 67 years old. She was born in 1949 in Baltimore, Maryland, the youngest of 4 daughters. She loved horse riding, hiking, tennis and swimming.

On July 30 1967, she was swimming in the sea, aged 17, with a group of friends and she took a dive into the water, misjudging the depth. She broke her spine in her neck and became quadriplegic, no movement from the shoulders down.

During two years of rehabilitation she experienced anger and depression and suicidal thought and her faith was shaken.

But she came through this and she learned to paint with the brush in her mouth and to write in the same way. Her faith was stronger than ever and she has been a world famous evangelist for the past fifty years or so. She has written over 40 books and in 1979 she starred in a movie about her life. I was a fairly new Christian then and I remember the film being shown in my church. It had a deep influence on my faith and the faith of those who heard about her. She founded Joni and Friends, an international Christian organisation serving the disabled community. In 1982 she married Ken Tada.

A couple of weeks ago she reflected on her life journey in an article entitled **In Awe of Her God: Joni’s Fifty Years of Counting Quadriplegia Joy.**

I shared some of the article with the Guild and I won’t repeat that today but you can read the article for yourselves. Here are a few short comments from the article. Joni said –

- I am living in joyful hope because day after day, month after month, year after year, I simply cast myself on Jesus. I clung to his name, crying out constantly, “O Jesus!”

- Some days she prays – “My stamina is almost gone and my tank is almost empty. Come quickly to my side. Be the strength and song I can’t pull together on my own.”
- I want God to gain glory through the way I live out this “normal” life....that people would see the difference between the way I would naturally respond and the way God enables me to respond by his Spirit. May people who observe my life see that gap and give credit to God

Joni and millions of people around the world who live with disability and illness and struggles of many kinds– whatever is their individual thorn in the flesh – live with a breathtaking dependence on Jesus and a supernatural sense of God’s presence. Joni says at the end of the article –

**“I wish I could adequately describe what it’s like when I’m aware of the overwhelming presence and power of God’s grace in my life. It’s like “living above” my wheelchair in a strata of heart-splitting joy that comes with God-breathed courage to tackle whatever lies ahead! Frankly, I believe that the more aware you are of God’s grace, the more joy and courage you will have. This raises the question : when are we most aware of God’s grace? It isn’t when we are riding high with the string of green lights and open doors before us. No, it’s when we are needy and feeling spiritually impoverished.”**

Paul knew what it was like to face adversity and struggle and cope with weakness and huge frustration. In chapters 11 and 12 in 2 Corinthians he bares his heart and reveals his glory and his pain. He almost stands outside himself and looks in on himself. He says “I know a man.” That man is Paul himself. He has known the indescribable joy of seeing a glimpse of heaven. God revealed some of the things of paradise to him and he is full of wonder following this experience.

The word paradise comes from a Persian word meaning “a walled garden.” When a Persian king wished to give a special honour to someone, he made him a companion of the garden and gave him the right to walk in the royal gardens with him in close companionship. This is the experience that Paul had had with God, he had it once and only once. He walked with God in paradise. It is the kind of spiritual experience that we all should long for as Christians, to experience it even once in this life.

But for Paul, after the glory came the pain. Perhaps the glory gave him the strength to deal with the pain. The pain that came from “the thorn in the flesh.” Now the word translated as thorn is not a thorn as we might imagine it. It is better translated as stake. Criminals were often impaled on a sharp stake and it was a stake that Paul felt was twisting in his body.

Many theologians and thinkers over the centuries have tried to work out what this stake represented. It has been suggested that Paul experienced spiritual temptations, opposition and persecution, sexual temptations, physical disfigurement, epilepsy, severe headaches, eye problems. Perhaps the most convincing suggestion is that Paul suffered from chronic recurrent attacks of a virulent malarial fever that affected those who lived along the eastern Mediterranean. The pain of the recurring headaches was so acute it was considered to be at the extreme point of human endurance. When people wanted to harm their enemies they would pray to their gods that they would burn up with this particular fever.

It does not really matter to us what the thorn was for Paul. The thorn could have been many things. We all suffer thorns in the flesh. Our thorns are not likely to be the result of malarial infection but are real for us whether physical or emotional or spiritual. For Joni the thorn has lasted for most of her life and will be with her until she dies. Sometimes we have thorns that last for a season, a short season, a longer season, we do not know whilst we are in the midst of it.

Joni's life illustrates very well what Paul was saying about our weaknesses allowing God to show his power and his glory through us. Paul said he delighted in his weaknesses, in insults, in hardships because it was then that God's power rested on him. Joni said I count my quadriplegia joy, heart-splitting joy that comes with God-breathed courage.

This turns our usual thinking on its head. There are thousands of books about how to find your strengths, your skills, your talents and maximise your potential – but very few about finding your weaknesses and gaining from your weaknesses.

Paul sums up four purposes for his weaknesses as he saw it –

- Verse 7 – to keep me from becoming conceited
- Verse 9 – Christ's power is made perfect in weakness
- Verse 9 – so that the power of Christ may rest upon me
- Verse 10 – when I am weak I am strong

If we grumble and complain and constantly struggle against our weaknesses then people will sympathise with us. That would be a human reaction, after all, to our suffering. But God would not be glorified. God's power would not be revealed, God's supernatural influence on our life would not be shown.

If Joni had responded to her disability "in the natural" as she called it, without the supernatural power of God, we would never have heard of her. And God would not have received the glory. She might have become a good artist painting with her mouth – there are lots of mouth painters – and she might have written some books

but she would not have been a world evangelist bringing thousands of people to the Lord.

The Christian teacher John Piper discussed the thorn in the flesh and his particular thorn that he had handed over to God and he said “Don’t waste your weaknesses.” We might often hear it said, “Don’t waste your talents” but rarely hear it said “don’t waste your weaknesses.”

At the end of 2 Corinthians 11 Paul boasts of his hardships, his weaknesses, he does not regret them because they allow him to show God’s power in his life. He lists a catalogue of thorns in his flesh –

- He has been in prison numerous times
- He has been flogged and near death
- He has been beaten with rods and stoned
- Three times he was shipwrecked
- He has had to keep moving on, facing danger from rivers, bandits and false brothers
- He has laboured and toiled and gone without sleep
- He has known hunger and thirst and cold

In spite of all his own troubles, he declares a concern for those of his brothers who are weak and who are led into sin. In spite of his own troubles he declares that God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ are to be praised for ever. He declares that he will only boast in his own weakness.

Paul did ask God to remove this thorn from his flesh, three times he asked but he heard God say “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.

I had the experience of God saying the same thing about a woman I knew about 10 years ago. She had been involved in children’s work in a church I was attached to. I met her at a conference and she told me that she had a very debilitating problem. She had prayed about it, others had prayed over her, she had asked God to remove this affliction but there had been no change over several years.

As I returned to the flat where I was staying after this conversation, I asked God to give me a word for this woman, seeking a word of comfort or encouragement that I could give her. Within minutes he gave me a word – 2 Corinthians 12:7-10 – Paul’s thorn in his flesh and God’s grace being sufficient. I was quite taken aback, shocked even. The word was so clearly in response to her need but it was not a word I felt I could give to her. I have met her only once or twice over the years since then and have not had an opportunity to ask her if she recovered from the condition that had

troubled her. Maybe one day I will share that word with her but God would have to prompt me very strongly to do so!

Or maybe that will never be necessary! She still praises God and is an evangelist on the streets amongst homeless people and so she seems to have been able, like Paul and Joni, to accept and trust God and carry on.

Paul's attitudes to praising God in hardship and weakness reflect David in the psalms.

In Psalm 31 we heard him begin, as he often does, crying out to God to rescue him from suffering, to be his fortress and his rock. He confesses that he is in distress, his eyes grow weak with sorrow, his soul and body are weak with grief.

He says at verse 10 (from The Message) **Be kind to me, God — I'm in deep, deep trouble again. I've cried my eyes out; I feel hollow inside. My life leaks away, groan by groan; my years fade out in sighs. My troubles have worn me out, turned my bones to powder.**

**14/15 Desperate, I throw myself on you: you are my God! Hour by hour I place my days in your hand, safe from the hands out to get me.**

And he finishes the psalm at verses 23 and 24, in response to his problems -

**23 Love God, all you saints; God takes care of all who stay close to him, but he pays back in full those arrogant enough to go it alone.**

**24 Be brave. Be strong. Don't give up.**

The Lord said **"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."**

Let us respond with Paul – **"Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses so that Christ's power may rest on me.....for when I am weak, then I am strong."**

**AMEN**

*Article Reference – "In Awe of Her God – Joni's Fifty Years of Counting Quadriplegia Joy" by Vaneetha Rendall Risner, 30<sup>th</sup> July 2017 (On Desiring God website)*

