

BEDWELL GLOBAL MINISTRIES

EXPOSITORY SERMON

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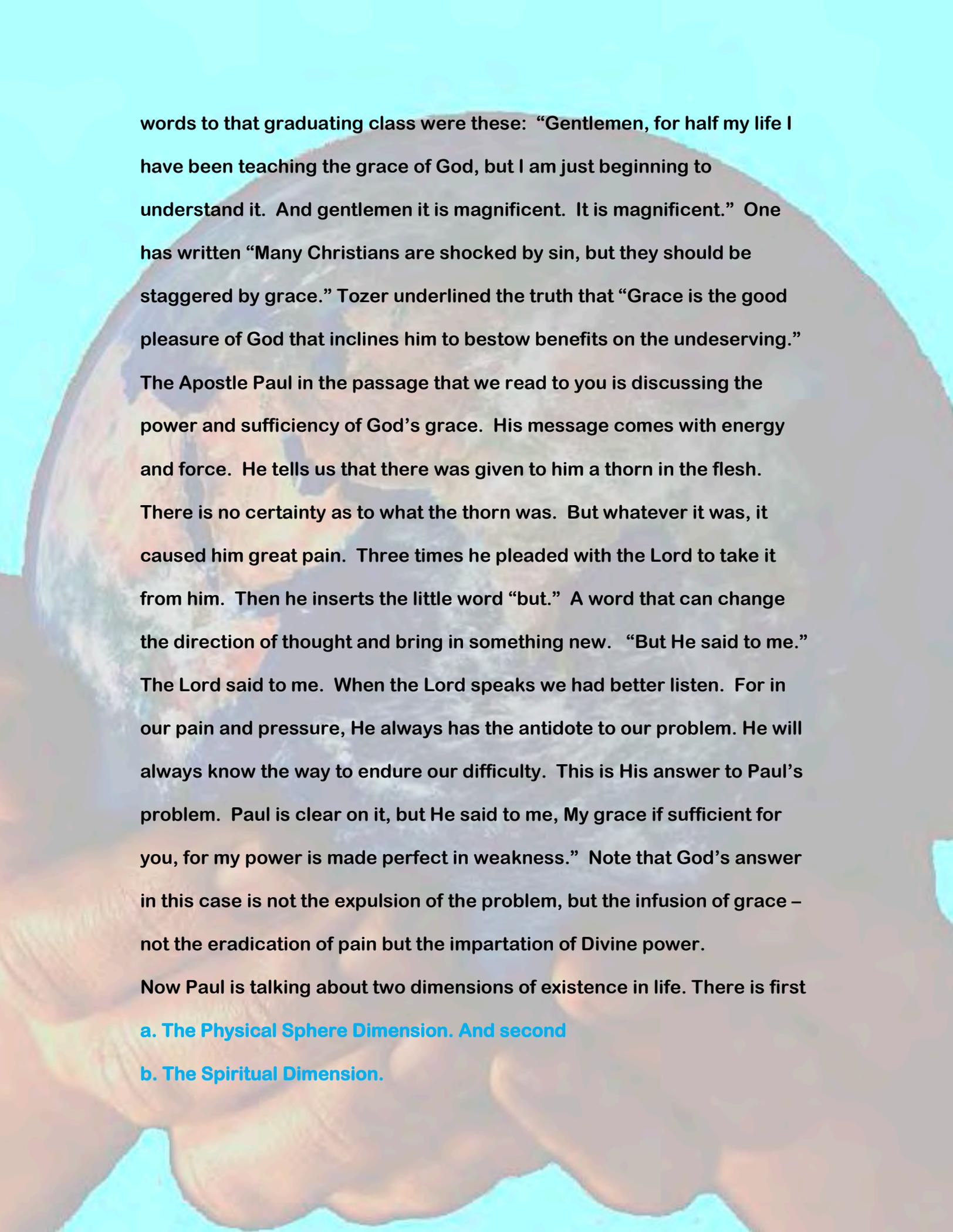
October 2015

GRACETHE SWEET SOUND

Scripture Reading - 2 Corinthians 12:1-11

Introduction

I felt impelled to go to this passage of scripture and talk to you about grace. I think it was Philip Yancey who wrote a book entitled “What is so amazing about Grace?” The short answer is because it is the Grace that comes from God. That is what makes it so amazing. And Max Lucado who was caught up in the wonder of grace, wrote a book entitled “In the Grip of Grace.” It was he who wrote “I’ve never been surprised by God’s judgment, but I’m still stunned by his grace.” Lewis Sperry Chafer, president of Dallas Theological Seminary, gave his last lecture from a wheel chair on his favorite subject – the grace of God. He was near death, he reached into his pocket, pulled out his handkerchief and wiped the perspiration from his face. He closed his eyes as tears came and his last



words to that graduating class were these: “Gentlemen, for half my life I have been teaching the grace of God, but I am just beginning to understand it. And gentlemen it is magnificent. It is magnificent.” One has written “Many Christians are shocked by sin, but they should be staggered by grace.” Tozer underlined the truth that “Grace is the good pleasure of God that inclines him to bestow benefits on the undeserving.”

The Apostle Paul in the passage that we read to you is discussing the power and sufficiency of God’s grace. His message comes with energy and force. He tells us that there was given to him a thorn in the flesh. There is no certainty as to what the thorn was. But whatever it was, it caused him great pain. Three times he pleaded with the Lord to take it from him. Then he inserts the little word “but.” A word that can change the direction of thought and bring in something new. “But He said to me.”

The Lord said to me. When the Lord speaks we had better listen. For in our pain and pressure, He always has the antidote to our problem. He will always know the way to endure our difficulty. This is His answer to Paul’s problem. Paul is clear on it, but He said to me, My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Note that God’s answer in this case is not the expulsion of the problem, but the infusion of grace – not the eradication of pain but the impartation of Divine power.

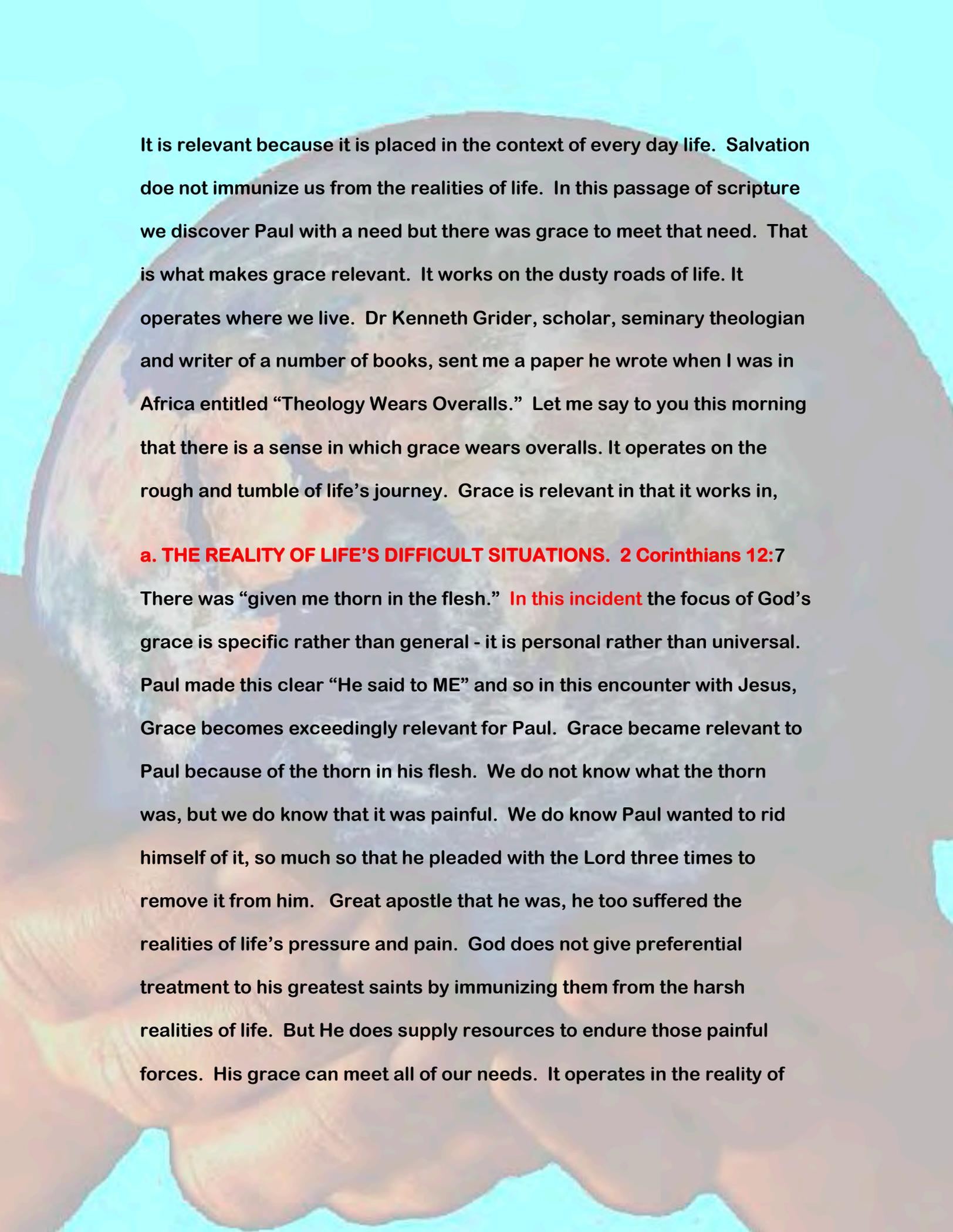
Now Paul is talking about two dimensions of existence in life. There is first

- a. **The Physical Sphere Dimension. And second**
- b. **The Spiritual Dimension.**

It is clear that Paul is not having problems in the dimension of his spiritual life. Note what he says. says, “there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.” The problem is that one can involve the other. Physical problems can be allowed to influence the spiritual life of a person. Paul words indicate this to be true. “There was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me.” This a description of the difficulty in the physical dimension of life. Then he goes on say that this problem was allowed come his way in order to **“to keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations.** Herein lies the danger of a spiritual problem. He had experienced “surpassingly great revelations.” He had been caught up into third heaven. He had been privileged to hear and see things that he was not permitted to tell. These heavenly visions could have easily made him conceited and arrogant. Herein lies the potential of real spiritual problem.

Furthermore spiritual problems can arise from our physical problems. A person can become bitter because God may allow pain or pressure to plague him. Paul, however, recognized that the thorn had been given to him in order to keep him from becoming conceited. As we study Paul’s problem, there are some pertinent truths from which we can draw some lessons for our journey in life. The first truth that strikes me in this passage of scripture is,

1. THE RELEVANCY OF DIVINE GRACE. 2 Corinthians 12:9.



It is relevant because it is placed in the context of every day life. Salvation does not immunize us from the realities of life. In this passage of scripture we discover Paul with a need but there was grace to meet that need. That is what makes grace relevant. It works on the dusty roads of life. It operates where we live. Dr Kenneth Grider, scholar, seminary theologian and writer of a number of books, sent me a paper he wrote when I was in Africa entitled "Theology Wears Overalls." Let me say to you this morning that there is a sense in which grace wears overalls. It operates on the rough and tumble of life's journey. Grace is relevant in that it works in,

a. THE REALITY OF LIFE'S DIFFICULT SITUATIONS. 2 Corinthians 12:7

There was "given me thorn in the flesh." **In this incident** the focus of God's grace is specific rather than general - it is personal rather than universal. Paul made this clear "He said to ME" and so in this encounter with Jesus, Grace becomes exceedingly relevant for Paul. Grace became relevant to Paul because of the thorn in his flesh. We do not know what the thorn was, but we do know that it was painful. We do know Paul wanted to rid himself of it, so much so that he pleaded with the Lord three times to remove it from him. Great apostle that he was, he too suffered the realities of life's pressure and pain. God does not give preferential treatment to his greatest saints by immunizing them from the harsh realities of life. But He does supply resources to endure those painful forces. His grace can meet all of our needs. It operates in the reality of

life's difficult situations. But it also works in,

b. THE FRAILITY OF HUMAN WEAKNESS. 2 Corinthians 12:8.

“Three times I pleaded with Lord to take it away from me.”. One of the striking features of this story is the touch of human weakness in it. He was a real man facing a real problem. It is true that he was an apostle but he was also a man with a human weakness. Three times, he said, I pleaded with the Lord to take this thorn from my flesh. He was fully human. I think sometimes, because he is the Apostle Paul, we place him on a different level than we are. But he was simply a man. On the one hand we see the greatness of his spiritual stature and on the other weakness of his frail humanity. His humanity is revealed by his intense desire to escape this haunting pain. He seems to asking is there no way out of this debilitating agony. Is there no escape from this piercing pain. The word thorn here is significant. It literally means a stake. He is referring to the form of Roman punishment by which the criminal was impaled upon a sharpened stake and left to die. This indicates the intense severity of the painful valley through which he was passing. It never occurred to him that God might have a purpose in his enduring the thorn. Paul's main concern was that was that it might leave him. This story strikes a chord in our hearts. If Paul could find triumphant grace in the time of his need so can we. We all have human frailties, but we can all draw from the well of God's grace to find strength to overcome those weaknesses. Such is the relevancy of the Grace of God. Second note,

2. THE ADEQUACY OF DIVINE GRACE. 2 Corinthians 12:2,8-9.

The words of Jesus are clear and comforting. My Grace is sufficient for you, for my Power is made perfect in your weakness.” Two phrases jump out at you from this verse. **“MY GRACE” AND “MY POWER.”** He is the one of whom John spoke so eloquently. “We have seen His glory, the glory of the One and only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”

John 1:14. That grace is available to all and it is completely adequate.

The Lord’s answer to Paul in his pain was not the elimination of the problem but the infusion of His grace.

The question arises “How do we draw from the fountain of this Divine grace on daily basis?” There are two principles which are the bases for the continued operation of God’s grace in our lives. The first is ,

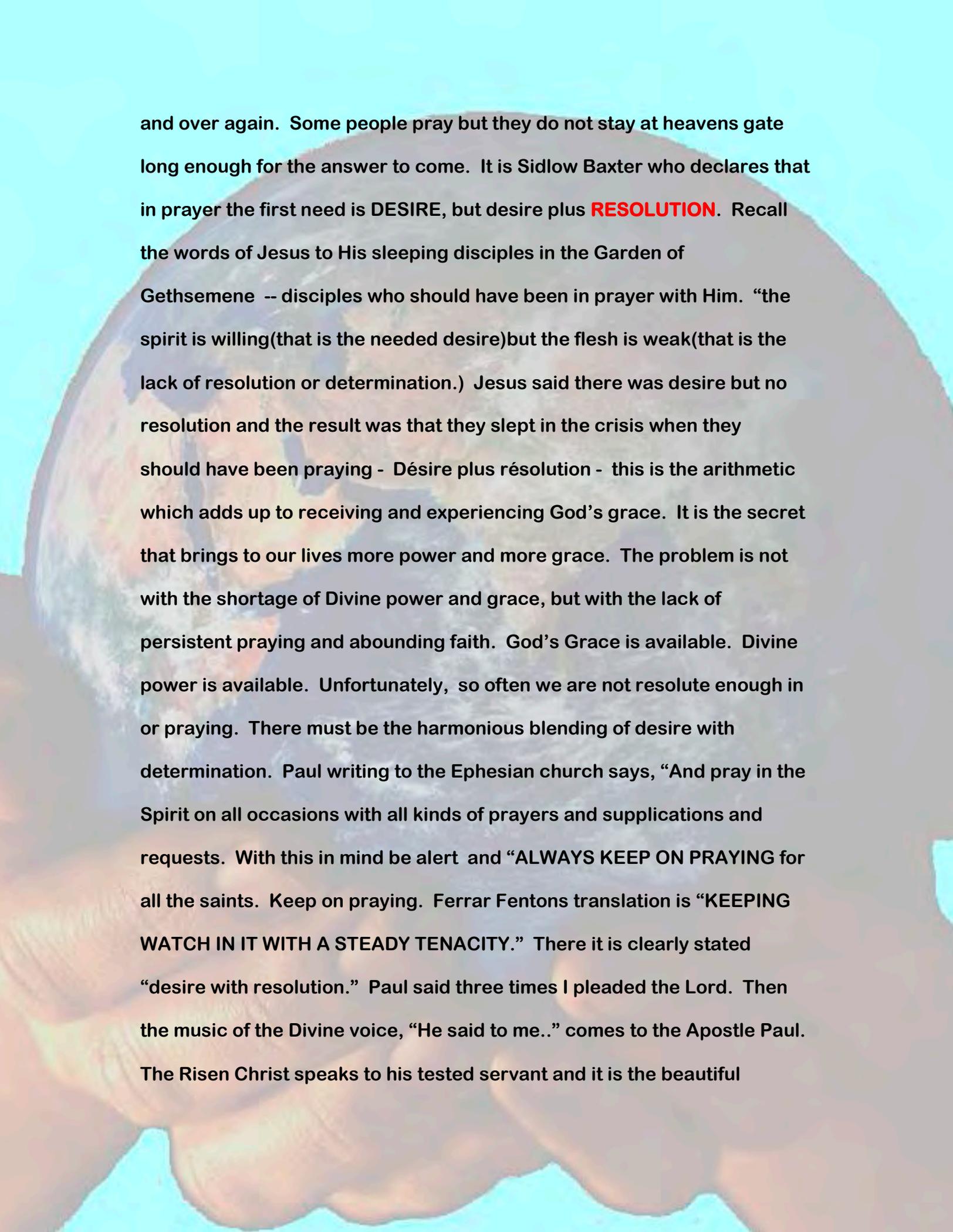
a. THE INTIMACY OF A PERSONAL COMMUNION WITH THE LORD. 2

Corinthians 12:2, 8-9. The flow of Divine grace into our lives is dependent upon an intimate relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. I cannot stress the importance of this enough. This relationship is summed up in one word - “PRAYER.” It assumes a clear channel between your soul and God. Paul’s words make this clear. “...I pleaded with the Lord.....and He said to me.” Here is a conversation between Paul and the Lord. It is indicative of an relationship between them. This relationship is rooted and grounded on a dynamic truth of the Gospel, and that is union with Christ. Paul testifies of himself in verse **2, “I know a man in Christ”** He witnesses

to his close relationship with Jesus. It is in maintaining the intimacy with Jesus that grace is discovered, imparted and operates. Note again the words of Paul “I pleaded with Lord.” And these the astounding words. comfort and strengthen the spirit of a person. “He said to me...” The Lord took time to speak to him. The operation of God’s grace in our lives lies in the cultivation of an intimate communion with Him. This cultivation is developed as we met with Him in prayer on a daily basis. It is in this sacred fellowship that grace becomes dynamic and empowers us to overcome every trial and endure all affliction. This amazing grace is not only discovered in the intimacy of a personal communion with Christ. Furthermore is also discovered in

b. THE PERSISTENCY OF A PERSONAL COMMUNION WITH THE LORD. 2

Corinthians 12:8. Paul said “three times I pleaded with the Lord...” There is no evidence that Paul was complaining here. His was simply describing the nature of the problem. There was no hint of bitterness in his spirit. This is clear because he prayed. He pleaded. The bitter person is demanding, complaining and miserable, but he certainly does not pray. Paul prayed which indicated his dependence on God. Afflictions should always drive us to God not from Him. For as one wrote “it is in Him that we discover the surplus of Grace” or the overflow of Grace. Furthermore Paul was persistent in his praying. Three times he pleaded with the Lord. This is a Hebrew figure meaning to pray ceaselessly, continuously, over



and over again. Some people pray but they do not stay at heavens gate long enough for the answer to come. It is Sidlow Baxter who declares that in prayer the first need is DESIRE, but desire plus **RESOLUTION**. Recall the words of Jesus to His sleeping disciples in the Garden of Gethsemene -- disciples who should have been in prayer with Him. “the spirit is willing(that is the needed desire)but the flesh is weak(that is the lack of resolution or determination.) Jesus said there was desire but no resolution and the result was that they slept in the crisis when they should have been praying - Désire plus résolution - this is the arithmetic which adds up to receiving and experiencing God’s grace. It is the secret that brings to our lives more power and more grace. The problem is not with the shortage of Divine power and grace, but with the lack of persistent praying and abounding faith. God’s Grace is available. Divine power is available. Unfortunately, so often we are not resolute enough in or praying. There must be the harmonious blending of desire with determination. Paul writing to the Ephesian church says, “And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and supplications and requests. With this in mind be alert and **“ALWAYS KEEP ON PRAYING for all the saints. Keep on praying. Ferrar Fentons translation is “KEEPING WATCH IN IT WITH A STEADY TENACITY.”** There it is clearly stated “desire with resolution.” Paul said three times I pleaded the Lord. Then the music of the Divine voice, “He said to me..” comes to the Apostle Paul. The Risen Christ speaks to his tested servant and it is the beautiful

evidence of Christ tender concern. It is a testimony to the truth that He does care. He is concerned! He is “touched with the feelings of our infirmities.” The voice of Divine concern is the basis of our hope and confidence. It is the also the promise of Grace. But the sufficiency and constant of the flow of Divine grace to us personally, is conditioned on the intimacy and persistency of our communion with the God of all grace.

Finally note,

3. THE AUTHORITY OF DIVINE GRACE. 2 Corinthians 12:9.

The Lord said to Paul “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness..” This is the Divine response to human need. It is also the Divine response to a cry for help. Note the significant use of the personal pronoun “MY” The Lord talks about “MY Grace and MY Power.” It is a particular kind of grace. It’s God’s grace. How gloriously the grace of Christ shines from the pages of the New Testament. Read it closely and you will discover His “perfect grace revealing itself through everything He said and did, giving Him perfect poise in every situation on all occasions and in every crisis. Look at Calvary, a powerful disclosure of the magnificent grace of God. John said that “The grace of God has appeared to us bringing salvation”. The word MY indicates the source and fountain of grace. The grace of God is as exhaustless as Himself. It is completely adequate! It is totally sufficient! Infallibly unailing! Its flow is eternal! Its authority and power unmatched. Such is the disclosure of power and the triumph of Grace. But if the power of His grace is to work effectively in

pain and afflictions in our individual lives there must be,

a. A CONTINUING SURRENDER TO THE PURPOSES OF GOD IN THE AFFLICTION. 2 Corinthians 12:9. In this story you have the tension between human desire and Divine purpose in the pain. Paul said I pleaded with the Lord to take away my thorn. This is what Paul wanted. This was the deepest longing of his heart. He wanted the piercing pain removed from his life. He seemed to be saying, “I cannot suffer this agony any longer Lord. Take it from me.” Did not Jesus Himself pray three times his agonizing prayer in the sweat of anguish and blood, ask that the cup be removed from Him. Yet as the cup could not pass from Jesus, similarly the thorn was not removed from Paul. Here we have the tension between human desire and the Divine purpose and Will. This incident teaches us that somewhere in that tension, if one is going to experience the release brought about by grace there must be a perfect surrender to the purpose of God in the pain or affliction. **There is no sin in asking the question “WHY?” as long as when He answers we willingly accept His solution.** What is so striking is Paul’s reaction to the Response of the Lord to his request. There was no rebellion, no resentment, no animosity but with a joyful submission to the will of God He writes “therefore will I boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses.....I delight in weaknesses, in insults, I hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties for Christ’s sake.” He was not committed to his own desires and purposes, but to the healing

saving purposes of God working through the affliction. He was surrendered not to the release of pain, but the release of power through the pain. Paul had come to the point of surrender to Christ and His purposes for him so that Christ's power could rest on him. If the power of God's grace is to operate in and through us, there must be this response of a continuing commitment to the purpose of God whatever the cost and where ever it takes us. If we do this then we will discover what Paul discovered,

b. THE CONSTANT POWER TO ACCOMPLISH THE PURPOSES OF GOD IN

THE AFFLICTION. 2 Corinthians 12:9-10. The Lord said to Paul "My grace

is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." J. B.

Phillips has interesting slant on these words in his paraphrase.

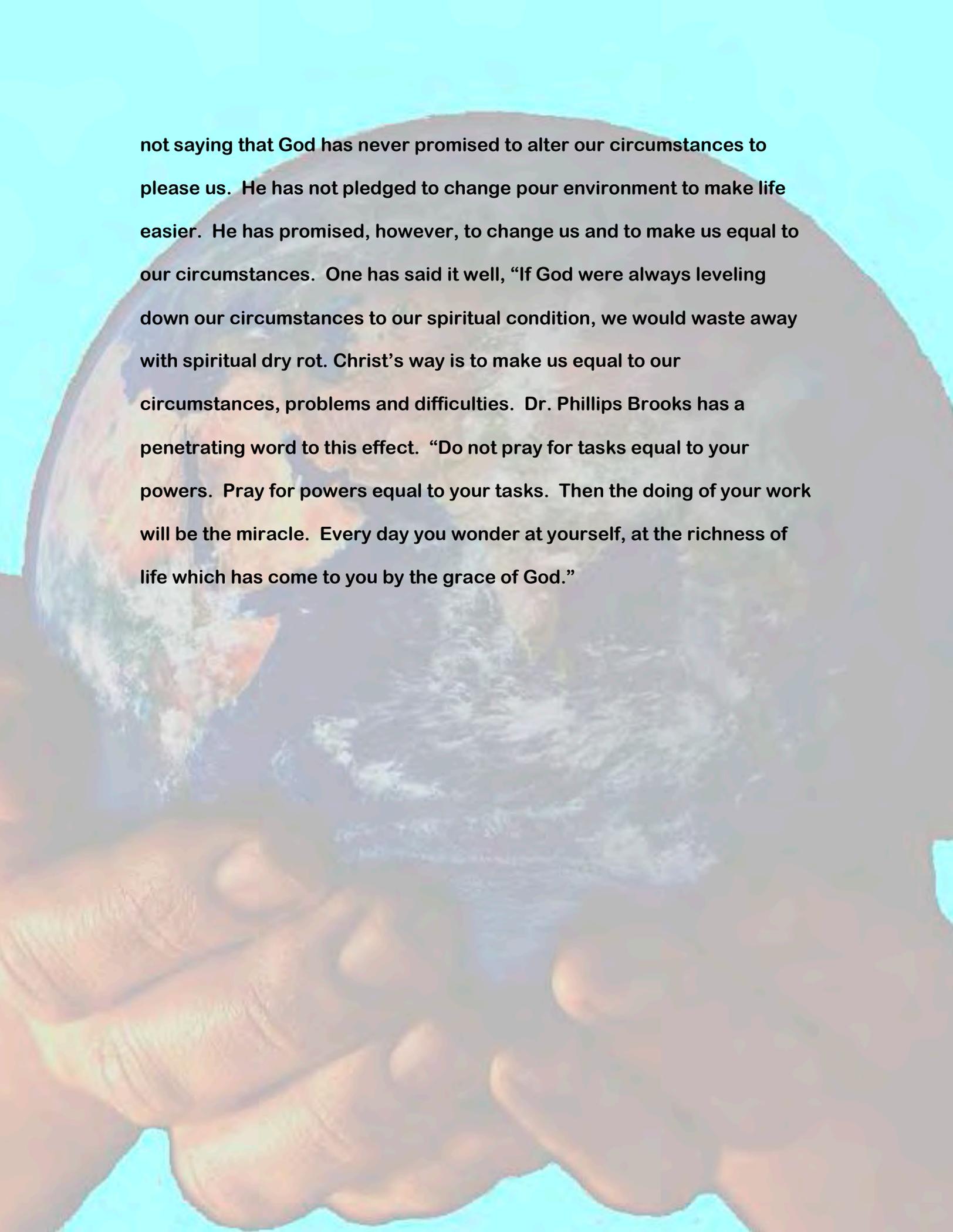
"Therefore I have cheerfully made up my mind to be proud of my weaknesses because they mean a deeper experience of the power of Christ.....for my weakness makes me strong in Him." God works His power through our weakness. One has said that this is "not done by a clenched fist but by a clinging hand. It is not victory by flogging yourself into trying harder, but by trusting yourself to the one who has grace to give you victory." There is change in Paul's attitude in this incident. At first he is pleading for deliverance continually requesting release from the problem. But then grace moves into his life and his attitude is transformed into glowing glorying gladly in that which had given him so much pain. Paul's original prayer was sincere enough, it was intense

enough and it was persistent enough, but it excluded the will of God. It had the mark and stamp of the human upon it. It was a self-centered prayer and that was understandable enough, but to have the thorn removed was poor compared to having its presence sanctified and used to reveal the power of God. “I take pleasure in distresses that the power of Christ may rest upon me.” There were two ways to diminish this burden of Paul’s. The one was to diminish its actual weight and the other is to increase the strength of the shoulder that bears it. The Lord’s answer to Paul was not the extermination of the problem, but that he might experience the power of Divine grace to overcome the problem. Had his request been answered Paul would have lost more power than pain; and we would have never known how the power and sufficiency of God’s almighty grace had met the deep need of this great apostle. Paul’s pain resulted in Christ’s power resting upon him and in his weakness he was made strong by the active working of grace in his life. One has said that “In our selves we are weak even where we are strong; in Christ we are strong even where we are weak. Self-sufficiency is insufficiency. Christ sufficiency is all sufficiency.” That is why grace is so magnificent. The poet wrote;

Oh, to be saved from myself, dear Lord;
Oh, to be lost in thee!
Oh, that it be no more “I”
But Christ who lives in me!

Conclusion

What does all of this say to us today? What is its lesson for us? Is it

A pair of hands, one light-skinned and one dark-skinned, are shown cupping a globe of the Earth. The hands are positioned at the bottom and sides of the globe, with fingers slightly curled as if supporting it. The globe shows continents and oceans. The background is a soft, light blue gradient.

not saying that God has never promised to alter our circumstances to please us. He has not pledged to change our environment to make life easier. He has promised, however, to change us and to make us equal to our circumstances. One has said it well, "If God were always leveling down our circumstances to our spiritual condition, we would waste away with spiritual dry rot. Christ's way is to make us equal to our circumstances, problems and difficulties. Dr. Phillips Brooks has a penetrating word to this effect. "Do not pray for tasks equal to your powers. Pray for powers equal to your tasks. Then the doing of your work will be the miracle. Every day you wonder at yourself, at the richness of life which has come to you by the grace of God."