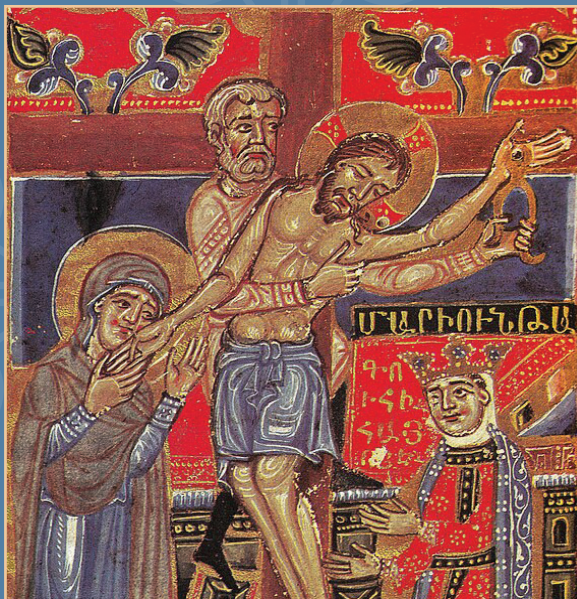


# EMBRACING CHALLENGES

## FINDING GRACE IN EVERYDAY STRUGGLES



VEMKAR TOPICAL SERIES

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*Written by Dr. Andre Markarian*

# EMBRACING CHALLENGES

## FINDING GRACE IN EVERYDAY STRUGGLES

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

- 2 Corinthians 12:9

### TO BE HUMAN IS TO STRUGGLE

**E**ver since Adam and Eve violated God’s command to not eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, humans were forced to live outside of the Garden of Eden and toil by the sweat of their brows until we return back to the dust. The kinds of toil that we have endured over the centuries has looked different with each generation. In ancient times, people weren’t sure where their next meal was coming from, as they had to hunt and plant with the hopes that the land would provide. Their hopes for survival were at the mercy of the forces of nature and their own skills of hunting and farming. Simply staying alive was also a challenge since your neighborhood sabre-tooth tiger was also looking for his next meal. Eventually, survival

became less of an immediate problem and daily struggles lightened up a bit. Communities formed and more sophisticated tools and strategies were developed to make life more “livable”, which created opportunities for new kinds of struggles like who would be in charge and how things would be divided up fairly. Domestic life increased in complexity, but some difficulties remained the same like staying warm in the winters, finding fresh water and maintaining a constant food supply. As communities grew, so did their needs and wants: larger homes, larger pastures, larger wells, larger flocks. Rulers emerged to govern over people which created new tensions and risks. The desire to expand wealth, territory and influence resulted in more conflict, warfare and enslavement. Despite human driven innovation and creativity, human avarice and selfishness allowed struggle and suffering to continue to thrive. The balance between supply and demand, health and illness, war and peace, life and death were always in tension, never yielding to resolution. Despite solving supply problems, the industrial revolution simply made us desire more. Innovations in science and technology gave us better health and easier lifestyles only to create new issues with managing our “stuff” and leisure activities. No longer do we worry about third world issues like drought, famine and pestilence. These struggles have been

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replaced by their more modern versions of social media anxiety, pesticide toxicity and gain-of-function viral infections.

Although with broad strokes it seems clear that humankind will continue to toil in this lifetime, our small (and big) individual daily struggles are the ones that occupy our immediate attention and steadily wear on us. Yes, we still have to worry about putting food on our tables each day and keeping clothes on our backs, but for most members of western society, these types of worries are generally background noise to the more acute challenges and frustrations that we face each day. The list seems endless: I have a deadline to meet, my stomach hurts, my child had a fight in school today, I can't find my wallet, the air conditioning is not working, my car broke down in the road, the milk is spoiled, my internet is not working, the neighbor is making too much noise, I sprained my ankle, and on and on and on. Sometimes the challenges are more serious and compounded: I just got fired, my husband cheated on me, the doctor told me I have cancer, my aged mother can't take care of herself any more, my brother had a heart attack and died, my child ran away from home. Maybe not sabre-tooth tiger attacks, but definitely no less traumatic 21st century equivalents.

What are we to do with such a fate? Are we

left simply to grin and bear our hourly, daily and perhaps lifelong individual struggles without some hope of relief? Must we go at this all alone or is there some resource that we can access, perhaps an ancient set of proverbs to recalibrate our thinking, a self-help guru with a nifty formula for success, or maybe a winning lottery ticket for a way out? Maybe simply hide the suffering with a conveniently prescribed pill, or worse, pay a regular visit to the local liquor store or cannabis dispensary?

## VICTORIOUS IN CHRIST

**R**ejoice, the message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ declares that the victory over our struggles is ours! Whoa, wait a minute though. Are you telling me that events that took place over 2000 years ago in a war-torn part of the middle east are going to solve my troubles in this life numerous generations later? As remarkable as this sounds, the answer is a resounding yes! When discussing such matters, allow me to suggest a commonly used metaphor to help us understand how this all works out. Think of the struggles in this life as part of a protracted worldwide conflict, an all-out centuries-old war between the forces of good and

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evil. Each of us, when we are born into this life are recruited into this war as foot soldiers. The unfortunate thing about this war is that no one gets to go on leave; we must fight the battles of this war until the very end of our days. Not every day will we see a full-on clashing of forces, but as participants in this terrible conflict, we must confront all the daily aspects of wartime adversity: pain, sorrow, illness, want, neglect, fear, despair, frustration, anger and ultimately death.

Now imagine further that some time while performing your daily wartime duties in your lonely enclave, you hear an overhead announcement declaring the following: *“The war is over, the key battle has been definitively won!”* Suddenly feelings of joy, relief, peace and gratitude overwhelm you because you know that your day-to-day struggling throughout the war has not been in vain. This is just what the Christian gospel message proclaims. Jesus Christ single-handedly won the war for us through his life, death on the cross, and resurrection from the dead. Ever since (and even before) our fore-parents (Adam and Eve) were cast out from the comfort and trouble-free security of their Edenic dwelling, God knew that humans would not be able to rescue themselves from the progressively more difficult (and sometimes impossible) challenges that we would encounter living outside of Eden.

The world we were trapped in was now a cursed world, an existence handed over to corrupted entities whose pleasure was to make our lives such a struggle that we would eventually even reject our own Maker. As frail creatures subject to our weak, self-centered wills, we would be unable to pick ourselves up by our proverbial bootstraps to create a worry-free utopia for ourselves. No manner of discovery, invention or philosophy would restore our lives of seemingly endless toil and struggle to our prehistoric Edenic bliss living in God's direct presence. Our rescue could only be achieved by divine intervention. We would need a Savior, a special kind of human that would fight this cosmic war on our behalf, correct all wrongs, overcome all evil forces to reverse the curse that caused the chain reaction of calamity and chaos over the centuries and finally restore the Edenic kingdom to its original form and purpose.

If this is the case, you might ask, then why must we continue to toil day-in and day-out? After all, hasn't the war been declared won? Well, as is often with war, it is not uncommon that even after the decisive victory, there are still some border skirmishes that will continue to arise until the victorious forces have moved into all the reclaimed territories. But eventually the enemy puts down all its weapons, accepts defeat and goes home. Similarly in this life, we

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must continue to push through those residual skirmishes of our life's daily challenges until the time comes when our Lord Jesus Christ returns to officially inaugurate the permanent victory he won for us centuries ago. Until that time, it is imperative that we remain focused on the fact that the destructive war that set us on this path is truly over and that, as St. Paul wrote to the church in Ephesus, "the rulers, ... the authorities, ... the cosmic powers over this present darkness, ... the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" have been vanquished. That is why we must always retain an eternal perspective of reality and not be drawn under by each wave that tosses us around on the seas of life.

## THE COSMIC BLACKSMITH

**Y**et, after all the post-victory merry-making has died down, we humans might pause for a moment and wonder why it simply doesn't feel like the war is over. Are these leftover border skirmishes really necessary? I mean, isn't God, God after all? Now that Jesus the Savior has done his part, doesn't God have the power and desire to end all this day-to-day struggle and suffering as soon as possible? How can I remain positive and hopeful each day despite all the burdens

that I carry? These are fair questions that require an answer which the Lord has graciously provided.

In the Bible, God refers to us as his sons and daughters. He uses this language to convey not only His feelings of intimacy toward us, but the language also defines our relationship with Him from which all His feelings and actions flow. One of the most important and necessary tools in a father's toolbox is discipline. Our Heavenly Father uses the regular happenings in this world as a means of molding and shaping us to conform to the likeness of His perfect Son Jesus in preparation for the new Kingdom to come. Now most people would naturally recognize that positive occurrences generally don't tend to develop desirable personality traits like wisdom, patience, charity and humility the way difficult circumstances do. God uses our daily trials as His most effective method of discipling us (note the similarity to the word *discipline*). C.S. Lewis, the famed British author, speaker and Christian apologist wrote in his powerful book *The Problem of Pain*, "We can even ignore pleasure. But pain insists on being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is his megaphone to arouse a deaf world." (p. 88).

Growing up, I was always fascinated with the antiquated trade of the blacksmith, typically

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depicted as a burly, muscle-bound, soot-covered man hammering away at a piece of unyielding iron against the backdrop of a fiery furnace. His repetitive action of heating and hammering never made clear sense to me then as it does now, particularly as a powerful metaphor for God's use of life's trials as a way of shaping and molding us. In a process called *forging*, the blacksmith heats a piece of metal to the point of optimum malleability which allows him to shape it by repeated hammering, thereby manipulating the metal to become whatever he wants it to be: a hinge, a bridle, a weapon or even a piece of art. The reason why he is able to do this is because when the metal is at room temperature, the bonds of the metal's crystalline structure are too strong and resistant to overcome, making the iron hard and brittle. With the right amount of heat, these metallic bonds gain more energy and are weakened, allowing the blacksmith to transform the structure with a high degree of precision according to his needs. Not only does the intense heating allow for the metal's reformation, but the repeated hammering breaks down the metal's larger crystalline structure to promote the formation of smaller, tighter and more uniformly distributed bonds thereby creating a very resilient piece.

In fact, nature itself has provided similar proof of how stress strengthens and refines its

object. In the world of winemaking, the right degree of environmental stress can dramatically enhance the quality of growing grapes and ultimately the taste of the wine they produce. Furthermore, research is now showing how intermittent cold or heat stress exposure can actually improve health and longevity in humans.

As described in the very beginning of this reflection, everyday struggles are a part of this earthly existence whether we like it or not. Our Heavenly Father uses the inevitable fiery trials of our lives this side of Heaven to carefully soften the resistant metals of our will and conscience so that He may shape and strengthen us into the people He wants us to be now and for the Kingdom to come. If He just allowed them to happen and did nothing with them, our condition would be truly sad indeed because our toil and suffering would be pointless and even worse, cruel. Even more incredibly though, while working the metal to achieve its perfection, our Divine Blacksmith simultaneously experiences the heat of the forging furnace and the painful vibrations of the hammer against the anvil of our earthly lives. Rather than sit from afar and simply watch us walk through the desert of our sufferings alone, God has chosen to walk through these trials and struggles with us. Jesus Christ, being fully human and divine understands what we are experienc-

ing because he has personally experienced it himself when he walked on this earth: hunger, cold, illness, frustration, anguish and even death. He asks us to allow him to join us in our daily walk, in both times of joy and suffering, that he may guide, comfort and strengthen us. Sadly, it is us who so easily forget to accept (or even reject) this invitation, which robs us of the necessary aid he provides to help travel the difficult roads we endure throughout life.

## GRACE AND MERCY

**H**ow exactly then does our Heavenly Father provide the needed relief to help us live out these lives we have been given and how will we recognize it when it comes? One of many places to search for answers to these questions is in the Book of Exodus. In this second book of the Bible, we read about how God rescues the Israelites from their exile in Egypt and brings them into the Arabian desert on their way to the promised land. In chapter 36, we read that God descended in a cloud over Mount Sinai and stood with Moses at the top of the mountain and proclaimed these words: *“The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,*

*keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin..."* (Exodus 34:6).

What does God mean when he refers to himself as “merciful and gracious”? Let’s start with the word “merciful”. In modern English the word “mercy” often conjures up images of a cowering individual prostrate before a powerful figure asking to be spared of some terrible fate or punishment. This image has come to us likely as a vestige of the medieval period where it was common to have oppressive rulers bearing down on the necks of their subjects. For the ancient Israelites though, who regularly experienced God’s divine mercy, their understanding was entirely different. In biblical (ancient) Hebrew, the verb to have mercy, “*rachem*” is very closely associated with the word “womb” (*rechem*). In biblical Hebrew, vowels were not written down as part of the text, but rather vowel sounds were added to the words when spoken depending on the context, which provided an opportunity for the Biblical authors to create various levels of meaning with a single phrase. Therefore, because of the linguistic connection between the two words “mercy” and “womb”, an ancient Israelite reading the Hebrew Scriptures (i.e the Old Testament) would see the word “mercy” and, along with its basic meaning of forgiveness/clemency,

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would perceive images of protection, safety and a mother's nurturing care as she carries her child in the womb. These images were deliberately used to invoke the feelings of the loving bond between a parent and its child.

Even more beautifully, a study of the meaning of the word "mercy" in Armenian (voghormootyun/ողորմոյնութիւն) adds another layer to the understanding of God's tender and loving care toward His children. Voghormootyun has etymologic similarity to and may even be derived from the word for oil (yugh/hղ). Oil as a substance is quite miraculous. Its unique properties allow for its many uses: preserving, soothing, nurturing and sanctifying. These characteristics of oil further develop the idea of divine mercy as an expression of the generous and healing way God deals with humans caught in a struggling world.

Similarly, the term "grace" has an equally rich quality behind it. In modern English, the term "grace" is typically used to mean a person who moves or behaves in an elegant or poised manner. It is unfortunate that, just as we saw with the word "mercy", when we read words in the Bible through our 21st century English-speaking lenses, it is very easy to distort the intended meaning of biblical truths by simply assigning our current cultural understandings to the language of ancient literature. In Hebrew, the word

“grace” is most often translated “*khen*” or its derivative “*khanan*” and is often paired up with the word “mercy” in the Bible. It conveys several meanings in Hebrew including treasure, beauty, favor, relief from distress and even vindication. The Greek word for grace, “*kharece*”, adds tones of kindness, blessing and the sense of leaning towards someone so as to extend favor.

As the Israelites wandered through the harsh Sinai desert for 40 years, they discovered that the God they followed is a Father who was fully committed to their well-being if they would only trust him. Whenever they encountered difficult circumstances, the Lord manifested his claim of being a god of mercy and grace by always being willing to hear their woes and supplications and provide the necessary remedy. God further substantiated this claim in his son Jesus Christ, who generations later still declares to us *“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”* (Matthew 11:28-30). What God extends to us when He offers us his grace and mercy is access to a never ending well of divine strength and support which provides rejuvenation, restoration and reward. His provision of empowering grace and soothing mercy is a gift of unconditional love un-

hindered by our circumstances, undiminished by the depth of our desperation and unconditioned by anything that is in us.

## Available to All

So then how may we receive God's offer of *khanan* and *voghormootyun* during our times of need? Where can we find unrestricted access to God's grace and mercy, entwined in the challenges and struggles we experience every day? The primary source is in prayer which we are challenged to do at all times and under all circumstances. In prayer, we can lay before Him all our anxieties, our frustrations, our disappointments, our needs and our uncertainties. In doing this, we proactively recognize that our ability to manage the difficult circumstances we face daily are not fully under our control and that we need help from the One who is greater than all, knows all and controls all. Laying our circumstances before His feet and asking Him to manage them for us is dramatically comforting and liberating because the Lord's direct involvement always results in the outcomes that are best for us, regardless of how we perceive it. If we truly relinquish our desperations (big and small) to His authority and care, He will faithful-

ly provide exactly what we need to get through whatever challenges we face and emerge victorious. His provision may arrive in the form of a resolution to a difficult circumstance, a surprising change in how a situation develops, a revelation in a dream or even a small miracle. Sometimes His response to prayer is just a small, gentle inner voice speaking unintelligible words of comfort and peace to our soul's ears.

Make no mistake though - more often than not, the victory will not look like a victory at all. It may take 4 days for the mechanic to get the right parts and so I won't have my car working until then; or I might have to lay in bed for a week to fight off the brutal cold that is torturing me; or it may take months to slowly repair a broken relationship; or the chemotherapy that I'm receiving is not working. But in each of these circumstances, we have placed the Creator of the universe in the driver's seat to get us to where we need to be and He will direct the process such that every stop along the way will be necessary and fruitful as long as we follow His lead. If you have doubts about the truthfulness of these words, just take a moment for a deep dive in the Psalms of David or the Lamentations of St. Nareg. The writings of both these incredible saints demonstrate how they understood what it means to lean on the trustworthiness of God in prayer and they re-

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joined at His faithful administration of grace and mercy which satisfied all the desperate needs of their daily struggles.

This brings us to the second place we find God's grace during our times of need: His Word. The Scriptures may have been written centuries ago to audiences we consider so different from us, but as described at the beginning of this reflection, our issues may seem different on the surface but they really aren't. The Words of the Lord are timeless and provide wisdom, perspective, and relief. They have guided our forebears through times of plenty and want, through ages of peace and war, through periods of joy and suffering. When we sit down and work through the Scriptures daily, we receive nuggets of wisdom, guidance and comfort that can inform all the issues we deal with on a daily basis. It is important to realize that for Bible reading to be an effective vehicle to receive God's grace, we must approach its use with purpose and structure. Scripture is not a vending machine that you visit when you need a quick candy bar pick-me-up on a busy day. Randomly opening up the Bible to see what revelation God has for you today is irresponsible, ineffective and irreverent. If we are systematic in our daily study of Scripture, the Lord will use our efforts to give us the inspiration we need to deal with the day's challenges. Whether we follow the

Armenian Apostolic Church's daily liturgical calendar readings (a.k.a. The Lectionary/*Jashots Keerk*), use a "read-the Bible in one year" plan or some other form of Bible-study tool, only methodical study will bear true spiritual fruit in our lives. Our God is not a disorganized god who acts capriciously and so neither should our study of Him and his Word. The grace and mercy that is embedded in the words of Scripture become available to us when we diligently work to discover and employ them in faith and humility. As the Psalmist joyfully declared in Psalm 119, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (v105).

A third place from which God dispenses His grace and mercy is through his Church. As Christians we have been called into a life of communion (common-union) and service. The Kingdom of Heaven that broke through into earthly time/space with the coming of Jesus Christ was one where his followers (through baptism and persevering faith) would forever be united with him in a spiritual union called the Church. Jesus himself taught his disciples how he is the vine and we are his branches, eternally attached to him receiving spiritual life and nourishment that we may extend out and bear the fruits of his love. St. Paul further characterized this new mystical relationship with God anthropomorphically, describing Jesus' followers as His Body: arms, legs, hands,

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feet, eyes, ears, all connected to each other but separate in identity, working together in synergy with Christ as the head. This Body is the tangible vehicle through which God would dispense His grace and mercy to fellow believers and the world at large by employing the unique gifts that He gives its members through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. How does this actually work in practical terms? At the most basic spiritual level, we receive grace through the celebration of our liturgy when we worship and pray **together** and receive Holy Communion. More concretely though, grace is poured upon us and those we minister to through the service and care of others. It might be in the form of a simple phone call offering comforting words, a visit to sit with someone and lend an empathetic ear, a delivered basket of food, a small interest-free loan, babysitting, helping in the yard, bedside prayers or anything that Jesus might do himself. In fact, Jesus graphically demonstrated what extending grace and mercy might look like many times during his ministry. One of the most powerful examples is found in chapter 13 of the Gospel of John. We read that during his final Passover meal with his disciples he suddenly got up, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying

them with the towel that was wrapped around him. When he had finished washing their feet he asked them. *“Do you understand what I have done for you? You call me ‘Teacher’ and Lord, and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.”* (v12-17) Take a moment to soak that in: The King and Creator of the universe knelt down and washed the filthy, dirt-covered feet of his disciples (recall that there were no socks in those days and open sandals was the main kind of foot covering). An equally powerful testimony we find in the Gospel of Matthew chapter 24:34-40. Jesus declares *“Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world, for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.”* Then the righteous will answer him, *‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food or thirsty*

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*and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me.’”*

As we confront everyday challenges, those of us that make up His Church have been called to stand by prepared and waiting to serve others in humility and love, dispensing His grace and mercy to all in need of them. The Church may not always appear ready and willing to serve, but rest assured, His army of comforters and helpers are there and can be accessed. This of course is also a clarion call to those of us in the Church who are enjoying peaceful and blessed seasons of our lives, to be seeking out opportunities to be there for others, both in our local churches and greater communities. In fact, reaching out to others as a comforting force in Christ when you are dealing with your own personal struggles can be an amazing source of grace by sharing in another’s pains while working through your own. Through such acts of self-sacrifice and charity, we often discover the patience, strength and hope we so desperately need to confront our own daily struggles.

## Conclusion

When we are in the midst of difficult times, it is hard to believe that our Heavenly Father is attentive to and sympathetic of our struggles. Being creatures of sight, sound and touch, it is easy to feel that the eternal, immaterial God is distant and unmoved by the burdens we bear. We must take heart though that Jesus Christ, the fullest expression of God in human likeness, understands and empathizes with our struggles because he is intimately acquainted with them. Our Lord and Savior lived, suffered, died and ascended to the right hand of the Father so that we would have available to us an anchor tethering us to the God of the universe, steadying and securing us amidst the perilous waves of this life. Just as Jesus Christ stretched his hand out to rescue his disciple Peter from drowning in the tumultuous Sea of Galilee, our loving Savior offers his divine self to accompany us through the storms of life, ready to provide comfort and consolation today and every day. *“How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not”* Jesus sorrowfully exclaimed upon entering Jerusalem for the final time before his crucifixion (Luke 13:34). Deceived by the world’s enticements and their own sinfulness, the Israelites repeatedly failed to

trust God when they met with difficult circumstances just as we do today. Jesus had to suffer the torment of the Cross to demonstrate how far God was willing to go to show us his infinite love and desire to carry us through the trials of life on our way to eternity. Just as his suffering and sacrificial death were necessary to usher in a new and more perfect heavenly reality on earth, our own personal struggles in the fiery crucible of this earthly life help develop the grace, wisdom, endurance, compassion, patience, faith, perseverance, and sanctification necessary for our return to being God's image-bearing stewards over all of creation in the afterlife.

Reflecting on his own personal struggles in his second letter to the Corinthian church, St. Paul disclosed God's answer to his prayers: "*My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.*" St. Paul responsively then declared, "*I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ then, I am content with weakness, hardships, persecutions and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*" (2 Cor 12:9-10). The unwanted vulnerability that trials create in us becomes the platform upon which God forms and shapes us to become the children He wants and needs us to be. Through his grace and mercy, He moves us from

worldly brokenness to divine wholeness so that we might participate in his divine rescue mission of a lost and suffering world. And so, just like the ancient Israelites walking through the Sinai desert, our own story today is one of everyday struggle and hardship, wandering through a parched and wearisome land seeking relief. Yet, waiting patiently for us on the other side of this harsh wilderness is a desperately loving God, reaching forward with open arms to welcome us into an intimate relationship with Him where we are sure to find grace, mercy, peace, comfort, and joy now and for all eternity. Amen.

*"...In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me. "*

- Philippians 4:12-13

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