

# Sermon: Never Alone in Suffering: Protected by God's Sustaining Grace

2 Timothy 2:1

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## Introduction

In July of 1975, Paul Little wrote an article for *Moody Monthly* entitled "The God Who Never Lets Things Just Happen." At the time he was at the height of his ministry, serving as professor of evangelism at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, and helping many college students understand the Christian faith better through his books. One month after the publication of this article Paul Little was killed. Little was the victim of an automobile accident when a car crossed the median of the highway and hit his Volkswagen beetle head-on.

"Surely God had nothing to do with this tragedy," some insist. "Surely this was a freak accident that God would have stopped had He been able to do so." It is instructive to note the final statement that Paul Little makes in his article, "Nothing happens by accident. And we can rest with confidence in that."

Two years later, Marie Little, Paul's wife, was asked to write an article for *Moody Monthly* dealing with her husband's death. She chose as the title, "When My Husband Died." In this article she showed confidence that God was not caught off guard. Even though we cannot always understand His purpose and plans, we can rest in the confidence that He indeed has one and that it is being worked out for our good.

God's Word is filled with promises and

examples of His providential care for His people. God's people are not without heartache and pain, not without severe suffering at times, but they are also not without His presence, comfort, and care. The Apostle Paul is a prime example of one who suffered greatly but never lost sight of God's nearness and protection in his life.

## The Command

In his second epistle to Timothy, the Apostle Paul calls on Timothy to face the suffering that will come as an athlete, a soldier, and hard working farmer. He speaks of being wrongly imprisoned for preaching the gospel and of being abandoned by many he thought would stand with him. Indeed, he says, "all in Asia have abandoned me." He tells Timothy that he should expect no less. With one simple command, Paul points Timothy to the source that will enable him to keep it. "You therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim 2:1).

Paul's pastoral heart is revealed while making this emphatic statement, as is the means by which Timothy will stand strong. Paul makes one thing clear, "Timothy, you must understand that any strength you have will not be because of something you work up inside of you. It will not be because you were good enough or powerful enough or disciplined enough to say, 'I can do this.' Rather, Timo-

thy, you will stand strong because of God's sustaining grace in Jesus Christ. Your strength, Timothy, will come directly by the grace of God through Christ in your life."

We should note that the command, "be strong" is a passive verb. Timothy has no resources to fulfill it. Rather, he must learn to be strong as he relies, depends upon, and leans upon God's sustaining grace. The key is learning what it means to stand firm in the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Relying on God's strength alone is something each of us must learn. The grace of God does not merely save us (although it does do that), it also continues to sustain us. It empowers our lives, and gives us the ability to stand firm. Even in the midst of suffering and in the midst of opposition, Timothy, had to stand firm. The command from Paul is based on an implied promise. The promise is that God's grace is sufficient to keep us and to protect us.

### God's Grace

Several years ago, John Piper wrote a little four-line poem. It is called "What Is Sustaining Grace?" I have it on my desk in my office and at home. I look at it regularly because it ministers to me every time I read it.

Not grace to bar what is not bliss  
nor flight from all distress, but this  
The grace that orders our trouble  
and pain  
and then in the darkness is there  
to sustain.

(Piper, *What is Sustaining Grace?*)

Do you know that grace in your own life? Do you know the grace of God that is the foundation of everything you are? Even when there is darkness, pain, and

unbelievable trouble in your life, there is a sense of joy, assurance, and security. This sense comes not because you have it all together, for you may be ready to fall apart in your own flesh, but because you know that God is in control and His grace will sustain you. As a pastor, I could not make it even a single day if I did not know the reality of this truth. In pastoring Christ's church we carry the burdens and cares of our congregations. We hurt and weep with our people when they are in crisis. If I had to counsel and minister on the basis of what I can do in my own ability and knowledge, I would be helpless. To know the sustaining grace of God in Jesus Christ brings hope and assurance no matter what the need. Even in the midst of trouble, pain, and tears, it is enough—it is sufficient!

We talk about grace often, and some conceive of grace as a short prayer said at the beginning of a meal. Sometimes grace is understood in terms of looking at an athlete and saying, "Doesn't she have grace!" Sometimes grace is understood in a deeper way, so that it refers to God's unmerited favor toward me, whereby He gave me eternal life. That is so true! But, to understand the essence of the Christian life, to understand the power that comes from walking with Christ, is to understand that the walk is by grace, just as much as our initial salvation is by grace.

How do you face life? How do you face life when a great tragedy occurs? How do you face life when a hurricane blows through and everything you own is tossed to the four winds? How do you face life when a dear loved one is in a tragic accident and dies? How do you face life when there is an illness and healing does not come? You pray and pray and ask God to heal you or your loved one and it does not happen. How do you go on? How do

you go on when loved ones rebel? How do you go on when churches or ministers disappoint?

In preparing Timothy for suffering, Paul says to him, “You need to understand that all those things can happen. (Indeed, it is likely that all of those things will happen at one time or another in every believer’s life.) And, Timothy, some people will oppose you. You will suffer.” Paul himself had a thorn in the flesh that beset and troubled him for his whole life. He prayed that God would take it away, but He never removed it. God did say, “Paul, do not worry because My grace is sufficient for you” (cf. 2 Cor 12:7-10). How do you deal with such difficulties? If you do not know the grace of God in your life, if you do not know this sustaining, empowering, foundational grace of God, you will not handle difficulties very well. It will be more than the flesh can deal with.

### **Wisdom from Jeremiah**

Jeremiah also proclaimed God’s sovereign and sustaining grace in a beautiful passage found in Jeremiah 32:38-42.

“And they shall be My people, and I will be their God; and I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear Me always, for their own good, and for the good of their children after them. And I will make an everlasting covenant with them that I will not turn away from them, to do them good; and I will put the fear of Me in their hearts so that they will not turn away from Me. And I will rejoice over them to do them good, and I will faithfully plant them in this land with all My heart and with all My soul.” For thus says the Lord, “Just as I brought all this great disaster on this people, so I am going to bring on them all the good that I am promising them.”

How does Paul’s statement to Timothy

relate to what Jeremiah says about God’s people in Jeremiah chapter 32? The answer is this: Paul teaches that God’s grace is sufficient, powerful, and real. Jeremiah proclaims these four truths in the very same way.

First, God’s sovereign sustaining grace is based on His promise to be our God. Reflect on that truth. The sovereign Creator, Sustainer, and Owner of everything that is, the sovereign One who is greater than anything we could ever imagine, is our God. He is so different from us that we cannot fully comprehend the difference—it is just too great for us. But that God who is sovereign, omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscient has said to those who are His people, “I will be your God! And, you will be My people.” When God makes such a statement, He is saying that all the promises to His people are summed up in His promise to be God for us. We do not need anything else.

God promises through Jeremiah, “I will employ all that I am as God—My wisdom, My power, and My love—to see to it that you are sustained and remain My people. I will exert all that I am as God for your good. If you are in a covenant relationship with God, initiated by His grace, He will keep you by that same grace. I will be your God! No equivocation exists here. No doubt about whether He will act on your behalf. He will show you who He is and will use all His resources for your good.

Second, Jeremiah reflects on God’s character and His sustaining grace by which God promises to change our hearts and cause us to love and fear Him. Verse 39 says, “I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear Me always, for their own good, and for the good of their children after them.” God wants us to know that His grace is so powerful and

His mercy is so great that He will sovereignly and mercifully give us the heart we need to love and obey Him. God knows we are weak. He realizes we are fickle. He understands that we wander and have divided thoughts and interests. Nonetheless, He promises that He will take our straying and sinning hearts and give us hearts to love and fear Him. He will give us the faith and the fear of God that will lead us home to heaven. That is divine, sovereign, sustaining grace.

Often we picture grace as God saying, "Oh well you are a sinner, but that is okay." We sing the hymn, "Just as I am without one plea, but that Thy blood was shed for me, . . . oh Lamb of God, I come." While we come to Christ just as we are (we can come no other way), we must also recognize that when we come to Him, we are never left just as we are. He changes our heart. He turns our heart toward Him and gives us a desire for obedience. That is God's sustaining grace.

Third, Jeremiah says in verse 40 that God not only promises to be our God and change our hearts, but He also promises that He will not turn away from us. Furthermore, He promises that we will not turn away from Him. In other words, His heart-work is so powerful that He guarantees our perseverance and faithfulness. We could go to texts in the New Testament to remind ourselves of God's preservation of our souls. We could find texts where Jesus says, "I want you to know that if you are in Me, then you are in My hand. Moreover, I am in the Father's hand, and the Spirit of God has so enveloped us that you are protected by the full Trinity and the Trinitarian promises of the Godhead. You belong to Me. You are Mine and no one can snatch you out of My hands. No one! No thing!" That is sustaining grace! That

is the promise of the Father to His children—to be God to His people. God promises He will work in our hearts to guarantee (if we are a part of His covenant body) that we will never, ever turn away.

This is precisely what the promises of the new covenant are all about in Jesus Christ. Concerning the new covenant, God makes this promise: "I will put My Laws into their minds, and I will write them on their hearts" (Heb 8:10). God pledges that He will provide an internal desire to obey, an internal power that keeps us in the faith, and enables us to walk with Him. We will not look at some tablets of stone and say, "Oh I have to keep a certain number of laws." He will place the law within our hearts. He will change us by His sovereign and sustaining grace.

Fourth, I want you to see that Jeremiah says that God also promises to do this with the greatest intensity imaginable. Look at verse 41, God says, "And I will rejoice over them to do them good, and I will faithfully plant them in this land with all My heart and with all My soul." God expresses His intensity, His passion to care for those who belong to Him. He expresses it in two ways. He says, "I will rejoice over them." And, "I will exert My sovereign sustaining grace with great joy and do good to them. I will exert My sovereign sustaining grace with all My heart and with all My soul," says God. Do you hear the passion God reveals here?

God promises that He will love you, carry out His promises, protect you, keep you, and sustain you with the greatest intensity imaginable. He pledges, "I will pursue you. I will convict you. I will challenge you." God proclaims, "I will not let you sleep and rest in your disobedience because you are too important to Me. You are too special to Me. You are My children!

You are My family! You are My covenant body because I have loved you with an unimaginable great love. I promise you I will not turn away from you. And, I promise you this: if you are Mine, you will not turn away from Me. I will keep you by My grace."

### **Trusting God's Promises**

When Jesus was asked what is the greatest commandment, He said, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength." We are to love God with everything we are. However, we are utterly fickle and unreliable in our devotion to God. Far too often we are tossed to and fro by every wave and wind of untruth. The fact of the matter is that all we have to hold onto is God's sustaining grace. This is why the church has sung that great hymn "Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing" for years. The third verse says,

Oh, to grace how great a debtor,  
daily I'm constrained to be,  
Let Thy goodness like a fetter bind  
my wandering heart to Thee.  
Prone to wander Lord I feel it,  
Prone to leave the God I love.  
Here's my heart, oh take and seal it,  
seal it for Thy courts above.

What a prayer. Oh to grace, to God's sovereign, sustaining, omnipotent grace, I am a debtor every day! I am constrained and restrained by the grace and love of God. "Lord, let Your goodness like a fetter, like a knot, like a lashing, bind my wandering heart to Thee. I am prone to wander, Lord. I feel it! I am prone to leave You and wander from You, if left to my own strength and my own devices. Lord, I do not know any other way to say it, but Lord, here is my heart. You will have to

seal it for Your courts above. I can't do it!" As David said in Psalm 23:6, "Lead me in the paths of righteousness for Your name's sake."

Paul reminds Timothy that there will be great challenges to him and his ministry. Timothy will be tempted like those Asian believers and those churches that turned their backs on Paul because they were ashamed of him and his gospel. Timothy would face temptation from the enemy so that he would say, "I cannot do it anymore!" Paul encourages Timothy to be strong in His grace. Timothy must lean on God's sustaining, omnipotent, and powerful grace.

First Peter 1:3-5 gives us further insight into God's sustaining grace.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

Peter begins by blessing, honoring, and praising God. He focuses on God as the center of everything. He proclaims that God is great in mercy and announces that God causes us to be born again. God, who raised Jesus from the dead, grants us a living hope, promises us an indestructible inheritance, and pledges that this inheritance will never, ever, perish.

Do you see the emphasis on God in verses three and four? Peter focuses upon Him. He does not concentrate on his own commitment or ability, his own decision or his work as an apostle or pastor. He focuses upon God. He lifts God up as

utterly central! People will let you down. The church will let you down. Your bodies will let you down. Your abilities will disappoint you. But, when you focus on Him who is supreme, when you focus on Him who is the Giver of grace in Christ Jesus our Lord, it will issue forth in worship, praise, and strength for life and ministry.

Peter reaches a climax in verse 5. He reminds his readers that they “are protected by the power of God.” The King James Version says, “You who are kept by the power of God.” You are protected, guarded, and sustained by the power of God, through faith for a salvation that will be revealed in the future. Peter praised God because He protects us by His sustaining grace.

We are saved even now if we are in Christ, but we do not yet know the fullness of that salvation. We do not know the greatest part of the joy of our salvation. We do not know just how powerful that sustaining grace is that will deliver us to an eternal salvation. Peter wants us to know what is coming. There is much more grace and much more glory to be experienced because we have not yet crossed the chasm that brings us into His full and glorious presence. We have the first fruits of it. We have a foretaste of it. We have a little bit of it. Our joy in Christ right now, however, is going to be eclipsed by being in the presence of His absolute grace and glory when our salvation is fully revealed on that last day.

Peter also clarifies that there is danger as we travel on the road to heaven. We need ongoing protection after our conversion. We need ongoing power. Peter reminds us that power and strength come from God. Jesus says to us, “Do not fear man who can kill your body, steal your earthly wealth, and fire you from your

job.” If you are His, you are protected by the One who preserves you and protects you for all eternity. What a glorious thought: Jesus Christ is the Guardian of your soul.

### **Conclusion**

From all of the promises we have seen in Jeremiah, 1 Peter, and in 2 Timothy, do you understand that in every instance they are not saying that we will be kept from calamity in this world? They are not promising that Christians will be protected from sickness, trouble, or unpleasant situations. The Word of God makes clear that if you are in Christ, God protects your faith. God protects your inheritance in Christ, and while all the world may be falling apart around us and may explode in chaos, our God is in the midst of it all, protecting those who are His.

Some might be tempted to say that God cannot protect us from evil if we still experience it. No, if you read Jeremiah 32:42 carefully, it becomes clear that it was the Lord who brought disaster on His people. “Wait a minute,” you say, “I thought the disaster was from Satan. I thought the disaster was from the Babylonians. I thought the disaster was from those who hate God. What do you mean, God, that You brought this great disaster?” God says, “I order your trouble and pain to shape you into the image of Christ (Rom 8:29). It is not without purpose. I could make your life a life of ease and then you would believe that you are a good person. You might start saying to yourself, ‘I must really be good for God to treat me so nice.’” We often see our sin only in our trouble and pain. We are often awakened to our need for God and Him alone by the trouble and pain He allows in our lives.

What does God promise? I will never leave you. I will never turn My back on you. I will never forsake you. But I will never give you a life of ease either.

So you see, when the storms of life come raging against you; when it seems that nothing is going right; when sickness and sorrow fill your days—it is good to know the God who never lets things just happen.