

The God of Paul

by A.B. Simpson

The God of Paul is a God of all sufficiency who can save the greatest sinner, raise us to the highest saintliness, strengthen in times of suffering, heal the suffering body, and sustain the suffering body, and is sufficient for all service.

Scripture: Romans 8:37, 1 Corinthians 13:4-7, 1 Corinthians 15:10, 2 Corinthians 1:8-10, 2 Corinthians 4:7-10, 2 Corinthians 11:24-27, Galatians 2:20, Philippians 4:19, 1 Timothy 1:16, 2 Timothy 4:17-18

Topics: "God's Sufficiency", "Empowerment in Suffering"

Description

A.B. Simpson emphasizes the all-sufficiency of God as revealed through the life of Paul, who bequeaths his God to his disciples, assuring them that God will supply all their needs according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus. Paul exemplifies the transformative power of God, showcasing how even the hardest of hearts can be saved and how believers can attain the highest forms of saintliness through Christ. Simpson highlights that the God of Paul not only strengthens in suffering but also empowers for service, demonstrating that every challenge can be an opportunity for divine work. Ultimately, he calls on believers to embrace Paul's God and utilize His infinite resources for a life of holiness and service.

Transcript

"But my God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus." (Philippians 4:19.)

This is Paul's legacy to his disciples and friends. He bequeaths to us his God and all that his own life and experience have revealed of His infinite all-sufficiency. This wonderful phrase begins with "God" and ends with "Christ Jesus," and between these two extremes lie, first, "all your need," and second, "His riches in glory." It is not only a bank-note, but it is a whole bank with all the resources of the proprietor behind it.

The greatest need of Christian life is to know God and His resources. Now the Bible is just a revelation of the all-sufficiency of God through the human channels and instruments that He has used to reveal Himself. The typical lives and characters of the Holy Scriptures are not so much remarkable for themselves as for the divine Presence that stands back of each of them. The difference between human heroes and sacred characters lies just in this: the man is just a man, but behind the man of God, God Himself is ever standing greater than the man and overshadowing him by His infinite and glorious Presence.

When one of the greatest of our national heroes returned, his grateful country crowned him with the honors of a successful war. Behind him there stood, of course, the valuable realm that he had conquered for us and the glorious flag which he represented. But that was all. And he himself was for the time the supreme personality that absorbed the public eye and heart. But behind Enoch is Enoch's God. Behind Elijah is Elijah's God. Behind Moses is a Presence far mightier than Moses. Behind Paul is the marvelous Presence that his life reveals and that his last will and testament bequeaths to every Christian heart. Standing on the threshold of his new life, and just awaking from the startling farewell of his glorified master, Elisha faced the frowning Jordan and the mighty tasks of his divine ministry. But we are so glad that he did not ask for Elijah. He asked for Elijah's God.

And so Paul, separated from his beloved Philippian friends, does not try to comfort them with the mere promise of his earthly presence, for he knew that even that could be but temporary, but he gives them his God. Compressing into a single sentence all the meaning of his own experience and of God's infinite riches he says, "My God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus."

Each of these representative lives reveals God in some new light, and so Paul's God stands before us in a light as distinctive and quite as glorious as Elisha's or Elijah's. What are the lessons the life of Paul teaches us about the all-sufficiency of God? We have often looked at Paul, now let us look at Paul's wonderful God.

First, we see that the God of Paul is a God that can save the greatest sinner and reach the hardest case of unbelief. Paul presents himself to us as the pattern sinner. With deepest humility, and yet utmost self-unconsciousness, he tells us not how deserving he was, but how unworthy. He counts himself the pattern sinner set forth on purpose to show that God can save anybody since He saved him. "For this cause," he says, "I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might shew forth all longsuffering, for a pattern to them which should hereafter believe on him to life everlasting." After Paul, anybody.

The peculiarity of Paul's case, that made it especially difficult, was that Paul was not so much a bad sinner as a good one. He was a moral man, a righteous man, a blameless man, a conscientious man, a religious man, a most earnest worker for the religious cause in which he believed. There was no loose joint in his harness where the arrow of conviction could enter. He had lived "in all good conscience before God," unto the day of his conversion. Such a man is very difficult to reach. Our appeals roll off like water. God's severest warnings found no lodging place in his armor-plated soul.

Yet one flash of Christ's revealing light, one glimpse of His suffering face and pitying love, broke this hard and willful soul to pieces and sent him forth to live under the constraining power of grateful love. Beloved, are you praying for some hard case, some godless, hardened soul? Remember the God that saved Paul and pray and not faint.

Second, the God of Paul is able to raise us to the highest saintliness, for Paul is not only a pattern sinner, but he is also a pattern saint. He dares to say, "Those things, which you have both learned, and received, and heard, and seen in me, do." But the primary feature of his saintliness is that it is all Christlikeness. He never stands in front but always hides behind the form and loveliness of Jesus Christ. He never tells us of his perfections, but only of the grace of his Savior. The very watchword of his life is: "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ lives in me." This is the highest as well as the lowliest form of holy character. If we could impress people with the fact that we are preeminently holy, we would discourage them, for they would put their own lives in contrast and say they could never reach us; but if we

tell them of a life conscious of its weakness that was able to take from Another the strength it did not have, the righteousness it could not work out, the loveliness that was foreign to its nature, and that the same gracious One will be the same to them that He has been to us, then people are encouraged and lifted up.

The story of Paul's spiritual experience is a constant revelation of Jesus and His nearness to, and sufficiency for the weakest heart, the humblest saint, the most strangely constituted and severely tried and hindered life. Three things were especially marked in Paul's saintliness. The first was what we might call righteousness, the quality of integrity, that essential foundation of all deeper and higher experience, a life right with God and man.

But that was not all. There was a second higher quality of Christian sweetness and loveliness. In one of his most striking passages he contrasts the righteous man with the good man. The righteous man is like the granite rock, hard but yet true. But the good man is like the moss covered mountain side, radiant with flowers and fresh with springing cascades, beautiful as well as true. "For a good man," he says, one would "even dare to die," but for the righteous man "scarcely" would one die. Now Paul exhorts us to combine these two elements. "Whatsoever things are just" he speaks of in one clause, "Whatsoever things are lovely," in another, and he bids us combine them. In his own life they were beautifully blended. His holiness was not harsh, inaccessible, unattractive, but full of lowliness, gentleness, affectionateness, sympathy, consideration for others, simple as a child, loving as a woman, tender as a mother, affectionate as a father, the fountain of tears always ready to flow at a touch, a heart all throbbing with humanness as well as holiness. This is the life that wins and draws many, and it will come from a higher source, from the heart of Jesus. It was he that wrote about love and lived it, too, but he might well have put the word "Christ" wherever he put "love" in the thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians.

But there was a third element in the character of Paul for which Christ was equally sufficient, and that is the practical element, the element of sense, soundness of judgment, symmetry and balance of character. "God has . . . given us" he says, "the spirit . . . of power, and of love, and of a sound mind." It was this wonderful completeness that gave strength to every part of Paul's extraordinary life. Now the God that made him what he was is waiting to be the same to each of us if we will meet the tests and take Him at His word.

And then, third, the God of Paul is able to strengthen in times of suffering. Paul was not only a pattern sinner and a pattern saint, but a pattern sufferer. In one of the most remarkable passages of his letters he speaks of himself as a "spectacle" and a "gazing stock," and one set forth in the eyes of the universe to exhibit what God can be in a human life. He was exposed to the severest trials that can come to a human soul or body. Listen to the catalogue in 2 Corinthians 11: "Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and day I have been in the deep; in journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by my own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness. Besides those things that are without, that which comes upon me daily, the care of all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is offended, and I burn not? If I must needs glory, I will glory of the things which concern my infirmities."

Again we have a description almost as startling in 1 Corinthians 4: 9-13. "For I think that God has set forth us the apostles last, as it were appointed to death: for we are made a spectacle unto the world, and to angels, and to men. We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ; we are weak, but you are

strong; you are honorable, but we are despised. Even unto this present hour we both hunger, and thirst, and are naked, and are buffeted, and have no certain dwelling-place; and labor, working with our own hands: being reviled, we bless; being persecuted, we suffer it: being defamed, we entreat: we are made as the filth of the world, and are the off-scouring of all things unto this day."

Here he tells us that, as in the Roman games the brutal master of ceremonies reserved for the last a bloody tragedy, and, after men's lives had been played with through the day, at last the thirst for blood was glutted and some noble gladiator was given over to be murdered in the arena; so, he says, "God has set forth us the apostles last, as it were appointed to death." Then he speaks of every form of privation, suffering and distress, all that can come from physical drudgery, the deprivation of friends and life, the cruel desertion of loved friends, the fury of the elements, the perils of the sea, the hate of Satan, and the inner burdens that came to him for the sake of others through his sympathetic nature. Paul bore, as it were, the whole burden of the suffering body of Christ, and it seemed as though it were appointed for him to endure that which remained of the afflictions of Christ for His body, the Church.

And yet how did he go through the fiery ordeal? Not only did he endure it, but he was more than conqueror; not only did he stand it with patience, but he gloried in it with triumphant joy. Listen to him as he cries: "We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed; always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body." Listen to him again, "As unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and, behold, we live; as chastened, and not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things."

Listen to him once more as he tells the elders of Ephesus not only of what he has suffered but that the Holy Ghost has delivered him. "The Holy Ghost witnesseth in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions abide me." And yet what does he add: "None of these things move me." They did not even disturb him nor take away his strength from the needs of others and the claims of his work. "Neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy, and the ministry, which I have received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the gospel of the grace of God."

What was the secret of this wonderful patience, this victorious suffering? He tells us in another place how God answered him when he asked that the great burden of suffering be removed. The answer was, "My grace is sufficient for you: for my strength is made perfect in weakness." "Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong." These things became to him but vessels to hold more of his Lord's grace, and so he not only endured them, but welcomed them and turned everything into victory and praise through the all-sufficient grace of Jesus Christ.

And then, in the fourth place, the God of Paul is a God that can strengthen and sustain the suffering body. Paul's experience reveals two phases. The first is the direct healing of actual sickness by the immediate manifestation of the power of God in the body. We read of one of these healings in 2 Corinthians 1: 8-10. Here we are told of a case where he was "pressed out of measure, above strength," so that he despaired even of life. But God delivered him in direct answer to prayer.

We are told of another similar incident in the Acts of the Apostles, where he had been apparently stoned to death at Lystra, and as the disciples stood around him he arose upon his feet and went quietly on with his

work as though nothing had occurred.

But we have a second phase of divine life in Paul, revealed in 2 Corinthians 4. This was not so much an immediate act of healing as a constant habit of drawing the life of Jesus Christ directly from Him and finding it a constant experience in his mortal flesh, enabling him to rise above the power of his own natural weakness and go through life with a weak frame and yet a supernatural strength. The same God can still be the same to us in our mortal flesh as well as in our spiritual life.

Finally, the God of Paul is sufficient for all the service that He claims from us. Paul's life was preeminently one of service. "I labored more abundantly than they all," he could say, and yet he added, "yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me." He took the strength of Jesus and the Holy Spirit for every task and he counted himself equal to anything in this divine endowment. Indeed, every situation that came to him was but an opportunity for service. If he was in prison, he immediately went to work for the salvation of all the prisoners. If he was joined to two soldiers in the barracks, before morning they were converted, and writing to the Philippians from Rome he told them the joyful news that all that are in the barracks have accepted Jesus Christ. Look at him on his voyage to Rome. We see a missionary who started off for the greatest field in the world, having received a free pass as a prisoner of the law, who took command of the ship through that awful tempest, first saving the lives and then the souls of all on board. Look at him again at Rome brought before the emperor, and even dragged into the Coliseum to fight with the lions. How did he look at it? It was simply an opportunity for service. There he had, at last, a chance to preach to old bloody Nero the message of judgment and salvation, and forgetting all about his own danger and even unconscious for the time of the roar of the Namibian lion in yonder cage waiting perhaps to devour him, his thought was to be true to his trust and let God take care of him. Writing about this incident he says: "At my first answer no man stood with me, but all men forsook me . . . Notwithstanding the Lord stood with me, and strengthened me; that by me the preaching might be fully known." And he adds: "I was delivered out of the mouth of the lion." His business was to preach to Nero; God's business was to look out for the lion.

In the face of a thousand disadvantages with neither churches nor missionary boards to back him, in a single lifetime this marvelous man carried the Gospel to all the leading cities of the world, and planted churches from which all the Christianity on earth today has come down. What was the secret of it all? "My God," and, "His riches in glory by Christ Jesus." Beloved, will you have Paul's God, and will you use His infinite resources for such a life of saintliness, victorious suffering, and holy service as he?

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