



## Sufficiency in the Spirit

2 Corinthians 3:4-6

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I'd like to draw your attention once again this morning to the book of 2 Corinthians. We are still in chapter 3 of Paul's second letter to the church at Corinth. The book of 2 Corinthians is not a book of the apostle Paul's that gets as much press as, say, the book of Romans or the book of Galatians, better known as theological works that Paul produced for the church, but the book of 2 Corinthians reveals to us Paul's pastoral heart. It is, as I've reminded you, his most emotional book, his book of greatest concern for the church, which doesn't mean it is devoid of theology. It is filled with theology. One of the greatest statements on the atonement of our Lord Jesus Christ is found in 2 Corinthians, chapter 5. That's not to say the book of Romans, for example, is just a bare theological treatise and doesn't have pastoral merit. It's a reminder to us that God's Word comes to us with both truth and application, and we cannot separate them out.

This morning, we look at 2 Corinthians 3:4-6. Please give attention to the reading of God's Holy Word. For the Word of the Lord is completely inerrant, the Word of the Lord is completely sufficient, and the Word of the Lord is completely authoritative. Second Corinthians 3, beginning at verse 4:

*Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.*

Thus far the reading of God's Holy Word. Let's pray for his blessing upon it. Heavenly Father, we ask that you would open up your Word to us, that as we read it, as we dwell upon it, we would be changed, that we would not merely gain knowledge but that our lives would be affected, that we would be made more and more like the Lord Jesus Christ. This we ask in Christ's precious name, amen.

Do you feel like life is going too fast, that you can't keep up with life? Maybe, as a result, you think what you need to do is to focus yourself on certain things, to equip yourself to handle circumstances around you. Perhaps what you need to do is to study the financial markets in detail so you can understand what's going on with our economy or perhaps you could get an Internet degree in infectious diseases. There are any number of people who are willing to teach you online everything they think they know about diseases.

Paul tells us something different this morning. He tells us to trust in our insufficiency, and when we do, we will see our need for the sufficiency of Christ. In our weakness, we see that Jesus is strong. So, this morning, I would like us to see three things from our text. First, we see Paul speak of *confidence*. Secondly, we see Paul speak of *competence*. Then thirdly, we see Paul speak of God's *covenant*. Confidence, competence, and covenant.

## Confidence

Let's begin by looking at verse 4 and Paul's call to confidence. He says, "Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God." I have to remind you again (I've done this several times and will continue to do it) that the background for what Paul is writing here is that Paul has been challenged in the church at Corinth. We need to remember this background frequently, because it affects what Paul is writing throughout all of the letter.

It is not just that Paul has been challenged personally, but Paul has been challenged about the nature of the gospel ministry. It is the foundation here that the Christian stands on and how he relates to others. Now, Paul's opponents were extremely confident. They had to be. After all, they challenged Paul who was the founder of this church. They were sure they knew best. They didn't need Paul and his weak ministry. No. They reminded the Corinthians that they didn't suffer like Paul did; they dominated. They were in control.

They relied on their skills and their abilities, and they were sure they were great Bible teachers. This is, of course, what Paul alludes to in chapter 2, verse 17. Paul, on the other hand, was open about his weakness. He wrote about his suffering in chapter 1, and he wrote about his troubles with the church in chapter 2. This is the exact opposite of what you would expect from a leader. You expect a leader to show confidence, to show certainty, but Paul is not afraid of telling of his weakness.

In our world today, a lack of confidence is a problem. For example, are you confident about the state of the world today? Are you confident that the pandemic will end? Are you confident that life will be better next year than this year? Are you certain that the stock market will rise? Are you certain that our country will be in a better place 10 years from now than it is today? What about 50 years from now? You see, everywhere we go, there is a cause for a lack of confidence. There is a lack of certainty all around us.

Now, you may think there have never been days like this, and in one sense that's true, but there *have* been days in which we've been uncertain and lacked confidence in which circumstances are hard. I am old enough to remember the days when I was in high school when we didn't have a pandemic but we had an enemy armed with nuclear weapons aimed at us, the Soviet Union, and we were constantly being told we were 30 seconds from midnight in which mankind would be wiped out from the face of the earth by a nuclear holocaust.

Perhaps you're old enough to remember, even a few decades farther back, World War II in which hundreds and hundreds of thousands of Americans died and millions died across the globe. We look at it in history and think, "Well, of course. We came back after Pearl Harbor, and we took care of the Japanese, and we took care of the Nazis, and we fought for freedom." But that was not a certainty in 1941. There was great fear. At that time, Americans thought the Japanese were going to invade and occupy California. There was no certainty of victory.

We can go even farther back. What about the rise of Islam? In those days, they didn't know that Vienna would not fall. They didn't know the forces of Islam would be stopped at the Spanish/French border. They didn't know Islam would be pushed back. There was a thought that Europe and perhaps even the church would be extinguished by the forces of demonic Islam.

We can go even farther back. What about the attacks of the barbarians upon Rome and the fall of Rome and the chaos that followed? Or even before that, when Rome was secure, the persecution of the church under Rome. You see, there are always trying circumstances. There are always things to make us feel that we are not certain, that circumstances will take over us. The world has never been a place where you could place your confidence.

I think perhaps the best example of this is the church in the late nineteenth century. There was a thought in the late 1800s that we were just around the corner from paradise, that the millennium would be on its way, that the entire earth would be Christianized, that there would be a period of peace, that we would conquer hunger [audio cuts off] (9:54). Then, of course, World War I came with millions of meaningless deaths. It's hard to have confidence in such circumstances.

But there *is* good news. Paul tells us that we *can* have confidence. He explains this in verse 4. His confidence in the ministry comes from Christ. He says, "Such is the confidence that we have through Christ." It is Jesus who gives confidence to Paul. He doesn't look at his circumstances. He doesn't look at his surroundings. He looks to Jesus. And the same Jesus Paul looked to is the Jesus *you* can look to today. You can say with Paul, "I have confidence through Christ."

Now, what *is* confidence? What does Paul mean here? Well, confidence is the state of being certain about something, relying on it, trusting in it. There is a boldness that goes along with that confidence. When you are sure of something, when you are sure of the outcome, you act boldly. You have no fear at all. I can give you an example of this. This week, I did something that perhaps some of *you* have done now in the current state of a dearth of live sports. I watched game seven of the 1986 World Series.

In 1986, I was in high school, and I was a New York Mets fan. Let me tell you, I did not have confidence in the New York Mets, especially when they lost some games in the series that they shouldn't have lost. I watched game seven back in 1986 with nervousness, wondering what would happen, especially as the Mets fell behind early and it looked like all was going to be lost. But a remarkable thing happened this week as I tuned in to the 1986 World Series.

My wife said to me, "Why are you bothering to watch that? You already know what happened." I said, "I know. That's what makes it fun." I didn't have any worries at all. I could watch the Red Sox score a run, and I knew the outcome. I knew the Mets would win. So, Paul has this kind of confidence because he knows Jesus Christ and he knows the outcome. You've heard me say it before. I'll say it again. The book of Revelation is summed up in these words: *God wins*.

You know the outcome. You know the victory of our Lord Jesus Christ. So, Paul has this confidence that comes from knowing who Jesus is and what he has done. It's not a confidence that comes from himself. Do you want to be confident, to have hope, to stop looking at your circumstances? That's how you have confidence. Stop looking around you and at yourself. That's the exact opposite of what the world keeps telling you to do.

The world wants you to be obsessed with everything that is going on around you, with your circumstances, with all of the things you can't control. That is the way of the Enemy, but the way of the gospel is to trust the Lord Jesus

Christ, to look to him, to see your surety in him. Stop worrying about how you can fix your circumstances with your skills. Know instead that Jesus is for you. Jesus is the Lord of your life, and that includes circumstances. Trust him.

Well, when we trust Jesus, we have a confidence the world does not know. Paul's statement about confidence does not come in a vacuum. It's not merely an isolated call to cheer up. Do you see how verse 4 begins? "Such is the confidence..." The word *such* here is a specific kind of adjective. It means of such a kind as this or of this sort. It describes the sort of high priest Jesus is in Hebrews 7. Jesus tells us that the kingdom of heaven belongs to the sort of people like children in Matthew, chapter 19: those who trust the Lord with all their heart. When Paul describes the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians, chapter 5, he says, "Against such things there is no law."

So, what is the *such confidence* here that Paul is talking about? It is the confidence Paul has in the work of the gospel. It's what he described in verses 1-3 of chapter 3. It is how he sees Jesus having changed the lives of those he's ministering to. Paul has seen the power of the Spirit in the Corinthians. He has seen the work of Jesus in their church and in that congregation. It's a confidence that comes from seeing what Jesus is doing in the lives of people through Paul's ministry, how Jesus is changing lives.

This confidence is so great that Paul can be confident before God himself. Now, Paul's statement here about confidence has two important prepositional phrases. The first we've looked at: this confidence comes *through* Jesus Christ. The second is that Paul says this confidence is *toward* God. We might also say *before* God. The idea here is of looking toward the person you are relying upon. Paul is comfortable. Paul is confident. Paul is standing before God himself with his gospel ministry.

How much more confident could you get? You see, we are confident most when we are around others who we think know less than we do. I'll let you young people in on a secret. The teacher is confident before you not because the teacher knows everything, but the teacher knows he knows more than *you* do, so that gives him confidence. It's the way a chef is before diners. He knows more about the meal and how it has been prepared and about cooking than those who are partaking.

It's the confidence an athlete has before spectators, because the athlete knows the game and the training and the plan and the tactics more than even the most avid spectator. But we're less confident around other experts, aren't we? We're even less confident around those we know are more accomplished than we are. That's when we get nervous.

But Paul has confidence before the Lord. How can he have that? It's because God is his source of strength and ability. Paul doesn't claim it for himself, but he knows God is the one who leads him to triumph. Paul is not leading the triumphal procession; *God* is, and Paul is following in God's wake. Paul knows he can trust the Lord.

## **Competence**

This brings us to our second point: competence. There is a direct link between confidence and competence. We are most confident when we are operating in an area in which we know we are competent. You could think about what that looks like in *your* life. I've described this for you before in my own life. I could tell you I have absolutely

no confidence in my ability to do repairs around the house. My lack of competence has been proven over and over again.

But I *do* have confidence in other areas. I can read legal contracts. I can coach baseball. I can read the Bible in Greek and explain it to others. I'm confident because I've done these things well in the past. So, is that what Paul is saying here? Is Paul saying to us, "I've got this ministry thing. I know how to build a church. You just follow my five-step plan, and you can do well also." Is that what Paul is saying to us? That is indeed how some ministers talk. They are supremely confident in their own competence.

One example of that was Charles Finney. In the mid-nineteenth century, Finney was a man who believed he could bring about revival. He said that if his methods were followed, revival *would* happen. If his methods were followed, sinners *would* be saved. If you just played a certain kind of music in a certain way at a certain time and used certain methods, then revival *would* come. It's not that God was sovereign and would bring revival by his Spirit where he could or willed. No. Finney believed he could bring it about through his own presumed competence.

That is against everything Paul is teaching us here. It's against everything Paul has been saying up to this point in the book. Remember, Paul has been emphasizing his weakness. In chapter 1, verse 8, he says, "We were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself." Then in verse 9, he says, "We don't rely on ourselves, but we rely on God who raises the dead." Paul does not rely on his own competence but on the competence of God himself.

In verse 5, Paul makes very clear that his competence is not from himself. Paul is the opposite of being self-sufficient. He's actually saying that he is self-*insufficient*. Should anyone think Paul is self-confident, he quickly rejects that. He says, "Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God." His language here is so clear it cannot be missed.

He uses a word he has used before...*sufficient*...to describe what he is *not*. He's clear that he cannot do it alone. There is no sufficiency in ourselves, he says, or that comes from ourselves as the source. So, what is Paul not sufficient for? The hardest of tasks? Perhaps the most burdensome parts of ministry? No. Paul tells us he's not sufficient for *anything*...anything, Paul says, that comes out of himself that has himself as the source. In no way is he sufficient.

Well, if that's the case, how can Paul have the confidence that he does? If he has no competence in himself, if he has no sufficiency in himself, how can he be so confident? He told us in verse 4 that he had supreme confidence, and then he seems to take that back in verse 5 by saying he is completely self-insufficient. This makes no sense at all. That's not how things are supposed to work. To be confident, we need to exercise and see our competence before others.

Take, for example, sports. The reason the best players are confident is because they've practiced so much that they trust their competence. They don't feel the pressure of the moment because they've practiced so often they know they can do it. They know they can make the shot, they know they can throw the pass, they know they can hit the

ball, so they're not taken over with pressure. Paul is saying here, "There's no way I can do this, yet I'm completely confident." What gives?

The answer is found in the second half of verse 5 where Paul says, "Our sufficiency is from God." Paul says that he *is* sufficient, that he *is* competent. It's not as if Paul is giving some kind of false humility here and claiming that he is the worst minister ever. No. You have to look closely at verse 5. Paul is not saying he's insufficient; he's saying that he's insufficient in himself. He says he has nothing to claim as his own, but he *is* sufficient because of God. His sufficiency comes from and is rooted in God.

Paul uses the same preposition here in *from God* that he used earlier in *from us*. It's a preposition, a word that means source or origin or the reason for. What he's doing here is giving us as complete a contrast as you can find in verse 5. You see in the middle of verse 5 there is this word *but*, and this is the strongest way to say *but* in the Greek language. It's a "capital B" *but*. It might even be a "capital B, capital U, capital T" *but*. Paul is setting up a great contrast between his insufficiency in himself and his sufficiency in God.

What he wants you to see is that human insufficiency is fine when divine sufficiency is present. Now, we might say, "Is this just Paul's personality? He's just someone who could be confident even when he wasn't confident in himself. Maybe Paul has some kind of superhuman humility." I don't even know. How can that even be a thing, superhuman humility? No. If we look through the Bible, we see that this is the pattern for the great prophets and ministers.

For example, Moses thought he could not lead because he did not have power of speech, but God provided and made him a great leader. Isaiah thought he was too sinful a man, a man of unclean lips, to speak for God, but God touched his mouth and made him a prophet. Jeremiah thought he was too young for the task that was before him, too inexperienced for the demands of a difficult age, but God said, "Don't say, 'I'm only a youth.' I will be with you." You see, over and over again, it is God who makes his people sufficient.

Now, what does this mean for *you*? Am I telling you that you are the next apostle Paul, that you should pack up your bags and go abroad to plant churches? Well, maybe. I don't know exactly what God has planned for you. It may be missions in Africa or it may be raising godly children or it may be studying in school to get a job and support the church in its work. But in any of these things, your sufficiency is found in God, not yourself. Your hope is in God, not in your skill. Never forget that.

## **Covenant**

Now, what has God made Paul and other ministers sufficient *for*? Paul has a confidence in the ministry. That confidence is grounded in a God-given sufficiency. God does this (and here is our third point) to make ministers sufficient for the new covenant. In verse 6, Paul explains this God-given sufficiency. He says, "God, who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life."

The Greek here is actually more direct than the English. In order to be smooth English, the English translation adds the words *to be*, but the Greek says that God made sufficient ministers, that the ministers themselves are

sufficient because of what God does. God's sufficiency is given for a direct purpose. It is not general here. It is directly related to God's new covenant.

So, what is this new covenant Paul is talking about? We don't have the time this morning to go into great detail about the new covenant, and that's okay, because Paul is going to be talking about the new covenant, describing its nature and its ministry, for the next couple of chapters, describing the difference between the old and the new covenant. But we can begin this morning with a general description of the new covenant.

God promised a new covenant to Israel in light of Israel's failure in the old covenant. We see this most clearly in the prophet Jeremiah, chapter 31. If you have your Bibles with you, I would encourage you to turn there. This is a passage that is well known and is easy to remember because it's Jeremiah 31:31. Jeremiah writes:

"Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord."

Stop and think about that for a moment. God is saying this new covenant replaces the covenant he made with Israel when he brought them out of slavery, what we commonly call the *Mosaic covenant* or the *old covenant*. Now, why is God doing this? He has already told us. Because they broke it. They couldn't keep the covenant. Israel was at fault here, and rather than leave Israel in a state of defeat, he makes a new covenant with them.

"For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."

It's important for us to see here that with God's covenant it is our inability to keep the covenant which causes God to make a new covenant with his people. Israel had the law from Moses, but they couldn't keep the law. Israel couldn't keep the law for 15 minutes. You remember when Moses goes up Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments on the tablets of stone, and on the way down, he sees that Israel has already gone to making and worshipping an idol the very same day.

So God, instead, promised a new covenant, a covenant that would be life-giving, a covenant in which he would empower his people. Hebrews makes clear to us that this new covenant has come in Jesus Christ. In Hebrews, chapter 8, it quotes this passage from Jeremiah, and then it says, "In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete." The new covenant is greater than the old covenant. It takes its place. It is the fulfillment of God's promises.

Hebrews 9 tells us that Jesus is the mediator of this new covenant, and in Hebrews 12 we are told the new covenant was ratified in the blood of Jesus Christ. So, Paul has been made sufficient to tell others about the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. His sufficiency is all about the gospel. That means it's not about other things. God did

not make Paul sufficient to reform the Roman culture or to solve the political battles of that day or even to stop the constant warfare between nations in Paul's day.

Why not? Because all of those things pale in comparison to preaching Jesus to sinners. This is the main difference between the old and the new covenant. The new is spiritual in every sense. We must think of the Spirit. The great failure of God's people with the old covenant was reducing it to the letter. That's what Paul means at the end of verse 6. "For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life."

Paul is not saying here, "Ignore the Old Testament because it kills." He's not saying here, "Ignore the written Bible, and instead, look for some kind of vague spirituality." What he means is that the external is gone. It has been replaced by the internal, by the empowering work of the Holy Spirit. He's telling you today that if you are focused on behavior or culture and human circumstances, you are looking in the wrong place. Those things kill apart from the Spirit.

After all, wasn't that the way of the Pharisees? You see, we think of the Pharisees as only those who fought with Jesus, but they were extremely concerned about the culture and the slide of the culture in their day. They were concerned about the paganization of the Holy Land by the Romans. They were concerned that people didn't follow the letter of the law to the *T*. But they didn't give thought to the Spirit, to the heart. They didn't trust the Lord.

They felt that if they followed the letter, they would be fine. They didn't realize that the letter without the Spirit kills. It caused them to kill the Lord of glory. The law is not bad, but apart from the work of Christ, apart from the application of the work of the Holy Spirit, all the law can do is condemn you and kill you. Only Jesus' work can save. To bring that message is what Paul was made sufficient for. *That* was his confidence.

As you look out over the world, as you look out over your life, do not be discouraged. It may seem that you are insufficient for the circumstances that surround you, but the good news of the gospel is that you *are* insufficient, but God *is* sufficient. God has promised to make you sufficient for what is most important, what is eternal. Stock markets will pass away, houses will crumble, careers will fade, but the work of Jesus Christ in his people is forever. You can be confident in Jesus Christ today, the one who makes you sufficient in his Spirit.