

# Sufficiency for Godly Living #2 - Characteristics of Living by God's Sufficiency

by Bob Hoekstra

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*Living by God's sufficiency means drawing on His abundant resources of life in Christ through faith in Him, resulting in a life marked by triumph, fragrance of Christ, and ministry to God and others.*

**Duration:** 1:00:14

**Scripture:** 2 Corinthians 2:12

**Topics:** "Christian Leadership", "Spiritual Triumph"

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## Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes the importance of true leadership and challenges the notion of leadership based on external accomplishments. He suggests that true leadership should be measured by the people one is leading. The speaker then discusses the various trials and difficulties that believers may face, but highlights that through Christ, they can be more than conquerors. Living by God's sufficiency is described as allowing God to write His message on our hearts, making us a letter of Christ. The sermon concludes with a reference to the Apostle Paul's testimony of being led in triumph by God.

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## Transcript

Study number two in our series of six studies on God's sufficiency for godly living has to do with characteristics of living by God's sufficiency. We have seen already a reminder that the Lord wants us to live and walk and grow in godliness, but we've been reminded that we need the right kind of resource for that. Man is not sufficient for that, though he'd like to think of himself as such.

We'd like to think just a new interest in God and a bit of zeal and dedication and commitment, and hey, we're just going to get on with it in a glorious fashion. Well, that shows some love for God and devotion, but doesn't really look at what the scriptures say about how. The what is clear, godly living.

And surely we would agree the scriptures call us to live godly in Christ Jesus, but so often we don't stop to ask how. Where does the sufficient resource come from? And we have seen in the scriptures already in our first study that the sufficiency is not from us, but it does come to us from God if we'll walk in faith and humility and dependence and look to the Lord to do that work in us. God's sufficiency for godly living.

In this study we're going to look at characteristics of living by God's sufficiency. That is, we'll look at matters that God marks upon lives, shapes into lives, develops as he uses our lives, as we walk with him

under the terms of the new covenant. Again, the title, characteristics of living by God's sufficiency.

This is not something we live up to. This is a life we grow up in. This is not so much something we achieve as it is something we receive.

Living by God's sufficiency, the more we draw upon the abundant sufficient resources of God for daily living, the more God will mark and shape our lives with these characteristics. We've already seen that the new covenant promises not only forgiveness of sins and not only the open door opportunity of an intimate relationship with God, but third, it provides an inner enabling work of the Spirit of God, taking the message of God from outside written in stones to inside written upon our hearts and minds. And it's that inner working of God that develops these characteristics in us.

As his sufficiency, his abundant resources of life in Christ are released within us through faith in him, our lives get marked with these characteristics. Don't get confused. This is not a list of, hey, let's get out there and make this happen.

This is a list of what God is willing and able to do in the hearts of those who will look to him day by day for his work within. Also, by way of introduction, let's go back to a portion of our two theme verses, 2 Corinthians 3, the end of verse 5, says, our sufficiency is from God who also made us sufficient as servants of the new covenant. The new covenant is the arrangement under which we live now with the Lord.

It has to do with looking to God for his sufficiency, realizing we don't have adequate resources in and of ourselves. And those who live by the sufficiency of God more and more will be marked with these characteristics. Number one, they'll become people more and more led in triumph.

2 Corinthians 2, verses 12-14. We'll begin to go verse by verse through some of these sections of 2 Corinthians. 2 Corinthians 2, verses 12-14.

Furthermore, when I came to Troas, this is the Apostle Paul giving his testimony of travel and ministry. When I came to Troas to preach Christ's gospel, and a door was opened to me by the Lord, I had no rest in my spirit because I did not find Titus my brother. But taking my leave of them, I departed for Macedonia.

Now, thanks be to God who always leads us in triumph in Christ. Now, the two preceding verses, which are followed by this bursting anthem of thanksgiving for being led in triumph, don't sound like triumphant circumstances. Verse 12, a good opportunity to minister the gospel in Troas had been opened up for the Apostle Paul, but he had an unrest, an agitation within his heart.

Titus was not there. He expected Titus to be there. Titus was going to be a key teammate in reaching out with the gospel in that region.

So Paul ended up going on to other territory, awaiting another opportunity. It's kind of a little sideline insight on the importance of body ministry in the body of Christ. We're not called to Lone Ranger Christianity.

We ride off, you know, high ole silver, here I go. You know, we don't even have Tano with us half the time. You know, it's just us.

We're going to make it happen. We're so individualistic in this American culture. We are the body of Christ.

We are the family of God. The Lord sent them out two by two, and Paul went out as a team. And at this point, he expected Titus to be there and help, and Titus wasn't there.

And he felt a lack of rest inside, and he just felt it was time to move on down the road for another opportunity, another time. But he adds, Thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumph in Christ. It didn't look like a triumphant situation.

It looked like a difficult situation. It looked like a bit of disappointment, which we're all familiar with. Disappointing circumstances come regularly, don't they? They do where I live.

Probably do where you live, too. Oh, there are plenty of blessings, a lot of wonderful works of God. There are a lot of disappointing circumstances, frustrating predicaments, and Paul seemed to be in one.

But he said, Now thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumph in Christ. Why is he thanking God here? Because though it didn't look ideal, it didn't look triumphant, he knew this truth. When you let the Lord do the leading, it's always in the Lord's victory, whether it looks like it or feels like it or not.

Thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumph. When God is allowed to lead and allowed to lead on His terms, He always leads us in triumph. And it's God's triumph, not ours.

When we take over the controls, when we're doing the leading and doing it on our resources and our agenda and our plans and our desires, we often run into all kinds of defeating situations. But whenever we allow the Lord to lead, we look to Him, we count on Him. Here's how He leads lives.

He always leads us in triumph. Sometimes it's not so much the circumstances where the victory is shown, but in our hearts, how we respond, how we think about life and God and the situation, remembering, letting the Lord lead, He always leads victoriously in His plan, for His purpose, in His triumph. God's victory, not ours.

Romans 8, 37 is a beautiful example of this kind of truth, Romans 8, 37. Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. In all these things, we are more than conquerors.

What are these things referred to here? Verse 35, Romans 8, tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, sword, and if that's not enough, verse 36, for your sake killed all day long, accounted as sheep for the slaughter. Yet in all these things, we are more than conquerors. How is that so? Through Him who loved us.

Since Jesus Christ won a victory, comprehensive victory over sin and death and Satan and self and the flesh and the world, in His death, burial, and resurrection, we who are in Him and let Him lead us, in all the difficulties of life, even in them, we're more than conquerors. Isn't it natural thinking, if I could just get out of the mess I'm in, I could walk in victory? Well, that's natural human thinking, but here's some supernatural godly thinking. Yet in all these things, still in the middle of the messy circumstance, we are, present tense, ongoing condition, we are right now more than conquerors.

The Christian life is not one that we win by a photo finish at the last day, nipping out our enemy Satan and make it to glory. No, even while He's attacking us, hassling us, He's already lost, we've already won. And we didn't just win a little bit, we're not just victors or conquerors, we're more than conquerors.

We not only got out of His grip and won't go to hell, we're not His any longer, but we're bound for heaven. We're joint heirs with Christ. We have eternal life.

It'll never get any better than it is now for Satan. These are his best days, and he's already whipped. He's headed for the lake of fire.

These are our worst days. They'll only get better in glory. We're already more than conquerors.

And when we let the Lord lead, He leads us in that kind of a triumph, knowing that it's ours and guiding us each step of the way. Victory is to be enjoyed and is available for all those who are in Christ and who are abiding in Him. That is, trusting in Him, depending on Him, counting on Him, looking to Him.

Many Christians, every Christian lives in Christ, that's where they dwell spiritually, but they don't enjoy the victory all the time, because often we're not letting the Lord do the leading. We're kind of in charge, and we're not drawing on God's resources. We're trying to muster up our own resources, you know, toughen up, bite the bullet, get through, you can do it, come on.

But thanks be to God, He always leads us in triumph. When we let the Lord do the leading, He leads us in His triumph, no matter what it feels like, no matter what the circumstances look like. And the more we live by the sufficiency of God, counting on God, looking to God, expecting Him to work, He marks our lives with this sense of, I'm being led in triumph by the Lord.

Not only does the Lord mark our lives this way, as those led in triumph, but those who live by God's sufficiency more and more also are marked with a fragrance of Christ, a fragrance of Christ, 2 Corinthians 2, verses 14 through 16. Now, thanks be to God who always leads us in triumph in Christ and through us diffuses the fragrance of His knowledge in every place. For we are to God the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing.

To the one we are the aroma of death leading to death, and to the other the aroma of life leading to life, and who is sufficient for these things. Having our lives marked with a fragrance of Christ, that's one of the consequences of living by drawing on the sufficiency of God by faith. Notice who is the one diffusing through our lives, sending forth from our lives a fragrance.

Now, thanks be to God who always leads us in triumph in Christ and through us diffuses the fragrance of His knowledge in every place. The same one who leads us in triumph here is the one diffusing the fragrance of His knowledge through our lives. Wouldn't you like to go any place and every place that we're allowed to go that doesn't violate the holiness of God and His purity? And every place you go, verse 14, have a spiritual fragrance diffusing, wafting out from your life by the work of God in and through you.

Wouldn't that be great? That's what is offered to us under the terms of the new covenant, living by the sufficiency of God. God Himself is the one who shows forth or displays or makes evident through us this sweet aroma, this fragrance of the knowledge of Him in every place. Those who live by the sufficiency of God, they have sort of a Jesus fragrance about them, you know? You can't smell it with the physical nose, but it's almost as though you can detect it spiritually.

You're with them and it's like, hmm, boy, that smells refreshing. That fragrance, that reminds me of Jesus. That's it, Jesus.

That's what's being spoken of here. It's not some religious cologne we splash on, you know? Got to smell like Jesus today. I mean, this is something that happens from the inside out, not the outside on.

The inside out is the way the new covenant works. God diffuses through us, right out of our hearts, out of our spirit where He dwells and is at work, this sweet aroma, this fragrance of His knowledge. A fragrance that comes from knowing Him.

A fragrance that says, that person, they know the Lord. I just know they do. The last few years I've been flying a lot, not only inside the states, but overseas in conferences and ministry and seminars and missionary trips.

I was on one airline and it's amazing, some of these flight attendants on international flights, it's quite a stretch, you know, 8, 10, 12 hour flights. Serving pretty diligently to keep people functioning, let alone comfortable, just functioning and semi-healthy. Many of them are quite diligent.

In the section right ahead of me on this particular flight, I marveled at this one lady. She was just so patient and so gracious and so diligent and always smiling to those who asked for her help, no matter whether it was the first time or the 15th time they had called for her help. And it seemed like there was a real caring for the people, not just getting the job done, you know, so you can get home and get the paycheck, so you can do things you really like to do, you know, that kind of real earthly, carnal attitude.

And I was just, I really was taken by this sweet fragrance, I thought. And disembarking, I think we're changing planes, I forget whether it was London or Munich, somewhere like that, and heading for Moscow. And leaving the plane, as I was getting off, stepping out of the door, there she stood right there.

And I stopped and I said, I said, could I ask you what's probably kind of a personal question, if you wouldn't be offended? And of course, she was, again, gracious, you know. She could have said, bon voyage, you know, thank you. She said, well, I don't think so, what is it? I said, are you a Christian? She said, oh, yes.

I said, you know, it just seemed to me that you could not be that kind of a servant in that cabin with all of us, unless you knew the Lord. She said, oh, I know the Lord, I love the Lord Jesus. That was it, that was it.

That's the kind of thing we're talking about here. God doing a work in us, so we don't smell like this dead, dying, decaying world. We smell kind of fresh and clean and alive and spiritually healthy, or at least moving in that direction.

It's a sweet fragrance of the knowledge of Him. It's a spiritual fragrance that comes from knowing the Lord. You know, you hang around people, get to know them, you kind of get like them.

It's kind of sobering, you know, watch out who you hang out with. You hang out with someone that has something special about them, it kind of impacts your life. Well, it certainly happens that way with God.

We get to know God, live by Him working in us, drawing on His sufficiency. It impacts us. It leaves a sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him every place we go.

Verse 15 says, for we are a fragrance of Christ. New Covenant servants, those who live by God's sufficiency, we are to God the fragrance of Christ. There's a spiritual aroma of Christ's likeness that comes out of our hearts and lives.

But notice to whom the fragrance goes first. We would kind of naturally think, well, it goes to the lost, of course. I mean, they need to catch that fragrance and be drawn to Christ.

That's not where it goes first. It is to end up there, but in the list of three directions here, the unsaved are third on the list. Where does it go first? For we are to God the fragrance of Christ.

Our first ministry is always unto God, pleasing Him, blessing Him, rejoicing His heart, loving Him, pleasing Him. The number one reason we want to see the fragrance of Christ developed in our lives is because the Father has this kind of heart. He said, this is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.

And we want the Father to look down on our lives and as it were, looking at us go, oh, that reminds me of my Son, that pleases me. We are to God the fragrance of Christ. But that happens among people too.

Among those who are being saved, number two, and number three, among those who are perishing. First the aroma to the Father, then to the Father's family, believers, then to those who need to be drawn into the family. To the one, we are the aroma of death to death.

To which one? Which group is that? Well, the immediate preceding to those who are perishing. Those who are perishing, primarily it would relate to those who don't know the Lord. They are perishing in the fullest extent of the word.

They are dead and dying. They have no life and they are headed for eternity without the Lord who is life. But by implication, it could be those who have met the Lord but aren't abiding in Him, hoping in Him, obeying Him, trusting Him, walking with Him.

They may be drifting or rebelling or running, not that they're losing their eternal salvation, not that they've lost heaven and they're headed for hell, but they're not flourishing in life. Experientially, they're not in abundant life. Their day-by-day life is perishing or weakening.

And to that person, we who have the fragrance of Christ wafting out of our lives are an aroma from death to death. How's that? Well, in the deadness and hardness of their heart, that fragrance in our lives of Christ smells like judgment, reminds them they're guilty, reminds them they need a Savior. It reminds them of their deadness.

And it's an aroma of death to death. They repel from it. It's like, wow, what's that? What's that religious odor? It isn't religion.

It's Christ in us. But if they are in self-sufficiency or dead in trespasses and sins and perishing, running away from God, not seeking God, they don't like that aroma. Have you ever had any neighbors or co-workers or colleagues who got a whiff of Christ in your life and said, thank you, that's more than enough? Who brought that awful aroma in here? It's heavenly, it's beautiful, but to them it's from death to death.

Reminds them they're on the wrong road and they don't want to turn. As far as they can say, it stinks, you know. All this church stuff, it stinks, they think.

But the thing is, the fragrance of Christ does not leave anyone where it finds them. It may be an aroma from death to death, but it's working on their lives. Sometimes we have to be driven deeper and deeper into the path of death before we'll ever cry out, help, I need life.

I grew up in church. My daddy was a pastor. One of my grandpas was a pastor.

Early years of my life, I thought everybody went to church and did it about every day. I kind of hardened my heart as the teen years approached. And that which others were, ah, that's beautiful, to me it kind of stunk.

And I've had enough of this. Oh man, here we go again. Church and meetings and religion, you can't do this and you can't do that.

To me it kind of stunk. That was my problem, not theirs. I tell you, it had to get pretty stinky before I cried uncle.

I had to run into an awful lot of Christians with the fragrance of Christ and me going, oh man, come on, give me a break. Open a window. This is too heavy, this is too much.

Until finally I said, you got me Lord. I've gone from death to death so often I'm so dead even I can't stand it. That was the last week in 1965 when I was 25 year old.

Heavy, 10 year path of from death to death. But I tell you, those who gave that sweet aroma of Christ across my life during those 10 years, sure I repelled, but all it did was show me all the more my need. So this is part of our ministry sometimes.

You don't have to make this happen. If you draw on the sufficiency of God, the more you do, the fragrance will go out and the fragrance impacts the lives. The fragrance is an aroma from death to death.

It's a work God's doing in us and through us and God is hitting lives with, touching lives, not leaving them self-satisfied and content and coasting to destruction. So the perishing are even touched by that aroma. But to the other we are an aroma from life to life.

Who is that? What group is that? Those who are being saved. This certainly would apply to Christians who are on the path of salvation, headed for glory, loving the Lord, forgiven, born again. But by implication, it could apply to those who are not yet saved but seeking the Lord.

They're trying to find life. And to those who know Him and love Him, that fragrance of Christ is an aroma from life to life. They love Him.

They can't get enough of Him. They get a whiff of that fragrance in our life and they go, oh that smells good, I want more of that. Tell me more about where that came from.

It's an aroma touching the life they love and have and stirring an appetite for more of it. An aroma from life to life. Even for the unsaved seeker, that fragrance of Christ is like, yes, that's what I've been looking for.

I'm sure some of you have had folks say to you, you know, you've got something I don't have, how do you get it? Where does that come from? The fragrance of Christ touched their lives. So to one we're an aroma from death to death, to the other an aroma from life to life. That fragrance of Christ smells like life, like hope, and it draws them on after the Lord for more of that life.

Years ago, nearly, well, approaching 30 years now, my wife and I last month married 31 years and soon after we were married, just a couple years or so, we went on a trek up to the Midwest from Dallas where we were living and I was going to school and pastoring. We went from Dallas up to Indianapolis and

Minneapolis. We're going back to our kind of roots on this earth.

I was born in Indianapolis, Indiana. My wife in Minneapolis, Minnesota. And my wife's clan was having a family reunion and they invited us and we thought, well, that'd be great.

I'd met a few of my wife's relatives at our wedding and I just really liked all of them. They were a real blessing, though most of them didn't know the Lord. They're just nice pagans, you know.

Successful businessmen headed for nowhere but disaster, you know. So we went up there and it was kind of a fun trip, you know, a thousand miles north or so and stopped in Indianapolis where I was born. I found the street.

I grew up as a child, showed my wife the house. We said, well, let's go knock on the door. Knocked on the door and told them who we were and one of God's little gracious kindnesses.

They brought us in like we're long-lost relatives, you know, took us in every room of the house and that was a great blessing to my wife, you know. I enjoyed it too, but it was neat. Then we went to Minneapolis, went to the street she grew up on.

She showed me the house. We did the same thing. Knocked on the door.

Another miracle. They brought us in like we're long-lost relatives. Showed us every room in the house.

I got a great kick out of that, you know. She was blessed. That was a great joy to me.

But the wonder of the trip took place soon after that when we're having a major Midwest, I think maybe fried chicken, garden-grown tomatoes and all that. Boy, I hope you had dinner. I'm sorry.

I mean a feast we had. But the wonder of the trip took place soon after that when we're having a major Midwest, I think maybe fried chicken, garden-grown tomatoes and all that. Boy, I hope you had dinner.

I'm sorry. I mean a feast we had. And oh, this spread of food out on the table.

We're all gathered around in this big dining room in one of the homes of the aunts and uncles of my dear wife. And Uncle Dick, who is kind of the old bit of the patriarch back there in the Midwest of those who haven't fled yet to Southern California, he was leading things, and it was time to eat, and he kind of sensed maybe it was time to pray. And he turned to me, and I was a pastor, and I was in seminary in those days.

He goes, well, Bobby, you're the professional here. Why don't you pray? And he didn't know. He was really pushing one of my buttons.

I mean, to me, professionalism in the ministry is the scourge of the American church. It has drug more people down into the pits of despair or distraction or hypocrisy or no thank you, you know. But, you know, I knew Uncle Dick was, you know, trying to speak in a realm he knew not of, so I just said, well, Uncle Dick, I love to pray.

Sure, I'll pray. That'd be great. It'd be a blessing.

So I just started praying. And I, you know, just started praying, thanking God for the food and for life and for the relatives and just on and on and on. Then said amen, and we sat down and had a great feast.

And after the meal was over, Uncle Dick pulled me aside, and in very hallowed tones, he goes, Bob, I want to talk to you about something. Bob, how can I say it? You prayed like you knew God. And that's exactly what's spoken of here.

The fragrance of the knowledge of Him in every place. Almost blew Uncle Dick's mind. I said, well, Uncle Dick, I do know God.

You what? Uncle Dick, Uncle Bob sat down at a card room there in the den that they'd put out for games and all, and my wife and I sat and shared with them the Gospel and our testimony, and they gave their hearts to the Lord. That's the fragrance of the knowledge of Him that is life to life, either to those who are saved or those who are just searching to find where the life is. But this again is not something we cause to happen.

This is a characteristic God marks on our lives as we live by His sufficiency. He just adds to our lives a fragrance of Christ. Here's another characteristic of living by God's sufficiency, a godly sincerity.

Verse 17, For we are not, as so many, peddling the word of God, but as of sincerity, but as from God. We speak in the sight of God in Christ. Godly sincerity is a wonderful characteristic to have mark our lives, being sincere as we serve the Lord, walk with the Lord, minister the Word.

Paul said, we are not like many. There were too many then and too many today who peddle the Word of God. They use it for their own ends, self-gain.

Any way they can use it to get an advantage out of it, they do, and come up with weird theologies and bizarre behaviors and practices. Just peddlers of the Word of God, trying to use it for self-gain. Paul said, we are not like that, as so many, and there are so many around today doing that.

New Covenant servants aren't like that. We are not as so many. The more we live under the terms of the New Covenant, that is, living not by our sufficiency, that is human resource, but by God's sufficiency, that is divine resource, it changes us from those who want to use the things of God for our benefit to those who want sincerely to be used for God's benefit.

It just changes our lives. As from sincerity, as from genuineness, as from God, we speak in the sight of God in Christ, marking our lives with a godly sincerity. 2 Corinthians 6, verses 3 and 4, same context, same area of the Scripture in this same book.

We give no offense in anything that our ministry may not be blamed, but in all things we commend ourselves as servants of God in much patience, in tribulation, in needs, in distresses, and the list goes on. God marks us as those who give less and less offense, less and less of self in the flesh and more of Christ, and the ministry does not get blamed or discredited, but rather, our lives become commended to people. People say, wow, that looks like the real thing.

A godly sincerity comes from God at work in our lives as New Covenant servants. Here's another one. This is a great characteristic to see God build into our lives, being made letters of Christ, letters of Christ.

2 Corinthians 3, verses 1 through 3. Do we begin again to commend ourselves, or do we need as some others epistles of commendation to you or letters of commendation from you? You are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read by all men. Clearly, you are an epistle of Christ, ministered by us, written not with ink, but by the spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone, but on tablets of flesh, that is of the

heart, that is a soft heart. Letters of Christ.

The apostle says in verse 1, do you think I'm trying to write my own reference letter? Is that what you think by what I'm saying here about what's happening in my life? And he sort of adds, implies, do I even need one? In verse 2 he basically says, you are our letter, you are our epistle. Think of that when it comes to being living human epistles. The believers at Corinth were Paul's epistle, known and read by all men.

Those to whom we minister become the letter that validates or invalidates our ministry. You are our letter, known and read by all men. A lot of people won't read one word of one letter in the Bible, but they'll read Christians intently, watching you at work.

Of course, they're hoping we'll slip up, you know. They're not always watching to see, well, how can I be like that, or what do they have I don't have? Often they're watching to see if we'll slam our thumb with a hammer, or we'll lose the sale, and now how are they going to act, you know? I mean, they're right there to, ha ha, you call yourself a Christian. But here's the thing, they're reading us.

They're reading us. Many who won't read the Bible at all, and read of Christ there, we can be the letter that touches their life, that was written by ministry of men of God, women of God, through the Word of God. But Paul said, you're our letter.

An elder brother in the faith, one day I heard him talk, and someone said, I recommend this man for ministry. He's led here and there and there, and he can do this and that, and he's this and that and the other. And this wise older brother said, I tell you what, he said, show me the people he was leading.

I thought, wow, okay. Is he a leader? Show me the people he was leading. We'll see how he was leading them.

That's kind of what Paul is saying here. Those to whom we minister, be it our family, our Sunday school group, home discipleship group, a team that we labor in in different ways and have an impact upon, those we minister to, they become the letter that either validates or invalidates our ministry. What is coming through us that is getting written into their lives.

But the high point of this issue of being a living human epistle is verse 3. Clearly, you are an epistle of Christ. When true new covenant ministry takes place, it makes people letters of Christ. The message of the letter, written on the heart.

Not just words parroted, recited, remembered, but the message written on the heart. And the writing done by the spirit of the living God. That's the new covenant at work.

God by His spirit, working on the inside, writing the message, making us letters of Christ. I think God wants to draw our hearts with something like that. Hear that and say, oh Lord, write that message in me to be read by others.

Isn't that a great thought to be walking about a living human epistle of Christ. People are reading, watching carefully, and they don't even know it. They're reading the message of Jesus at work.

It's like the Lord sneaking up on them. Through you, through me. Who would ever expect that, right? Who would ever expect to get caught by God by hanging around with us? But that's what happens.

We become letters of Christ. At first, we just look like, oh, kind of a, you know, subculture religious group, I guess. You know, just out of step with the times, and they're reading us, and the message of Christ is going out from our hearts.

What a great picture. But see, this is one of the characteristics of living by God's sufficiency. It's not I'm trying to make sure I come off like a letter of Christ.

It's God is writing on my heart a message that makes me a letter of Christ. It's a characteristic of living by God's sufficiency. A letter of Christ, a human life that just lets you know what Christ is like, reminds you of Him.

Do you remember our next scripture here, Acts 7? Acts 7 is one of the great sermons recorded in the Word of God, preached by Stephen, a young man, in the early history of the church. Acts 7, a great message on the history of God dealing with a stubborn people, His chosen ones. And then Stephen comes down to the conclusion of his message.

How's this for concluding a message, Acts 7.51? Let me wrap it all up, brethren, by saying this. You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you.

How would you respond if I said, now here's our conclusion? You stiff-necked and uncircumcised. Some might be reaching in their purse for a stone, you know. Well, that's what they did with Stephen.

They were so convicted, they were so irritated, they were so reactionary, they stoned him. But here's the thing. How did Stephen respond when he was being stoned? How would you respond? How would I respond? Acts 7.59, And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.

Who does that sound like? Jesus dying, crucified. Father, into your hands I commit my spirit. What a way to face death.

Verse 60, Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, Lord, do not charge them with this sin. And when he had said this, he fell asleep. Who does that sound like? Jesus.

Father, forgive them. They do not know what they're doing. I don't ever want to really know the answer to this, but I've wondered sometimes how I would have responded in Stephen's place.

Scrambling for life or commending my spirit in the hands of God. Praying for those who were stoning or praying fire down on the stoners. Lord, zap them now.

Show them who's boss. Or even maybe less than that. Guys, listen, that message, we can go back over it.

I could have been off base, you know. I mean, that's the way the flesh should go. Not Stephen, he was a real epistle of Christ.

He'd been touched so deeply by the Lord that in what is one of the toughest times for human beings. Death, and even an early death at that. He's behaving like Jesus instead of like a normal human being.

Letters of Christ, we can be marked that way. It is the will of God, His good pleasure to do so. Characteristics of living by God's sufficiency.

Those who walk under the terms of the new covenant, drawing upon the resources of God that are adequate for the task, whatever it is, their lives get marked like this. They are those who have a sense of being led in triumph. They're marked by a fragrance of Christ.

They increasingly have a godly sincerity about them, and their lives actually become letters of Christ. Now you might say, yeah, but who is sufficient for such things? Well, if you notice when we read earlier, that's exactly what the Spirit of God prompted the Apostle Paul to write. 2 Corinthians chapter 2, verse 16.

He wrote at the end of the verse, after he listed some of these amazing things God was doing in his life, he says, and who is sufficient for these things? Who's adequate to live this kind of a life? Well, he answers that in 2 Corinthians chapter 3, verses 4 through 6 that speak of our source of sufficiency. And we have such trust through Christ toward God, not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as being from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God, who also made us sufficient as ministers, that is, servants of the new covenant. Not of the letter, but of the Spirit.

For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. Such confidence, such trust, some versions translate, verse 4, and such confidence we have through Christ toward God. Where do we get the confidence, the trust that our lives can be marked this way, that we can be letters of Christ, have godly sincerity, a Christ-like fragrance, walking in triumph? That's a pretty confident expectation.

Well, we have such trust, such confidence, such expectation through Christ toward God. This is not a course in religious self-confidence. Oh yeah, I know I can be triumphant.

Yeah, I know I can have this fragrance of Christ. Yeah, I'm going to make myself sincere. Yeah, I'm going to be a letter of Christ.

Watch me go at it. That's not what this is about. That would be self-confidence.

We have such trust through Christ toward God. This is God confidence. This is confidence in the Lord God Almighty through our relationship with the Lord Jesus.

This is as far from self-confidence as you can get. Why? Because it includes this confession, verse five, not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as being from ourselves. Ooh, watch that kind of language.

Where's your self-confidence? Furthermore, you're kind of denting my self-esteem. Well, let's not dent it. Let's nail it.

Let's just crucify it. Be done with self. Let's find a life in Christ through confidence in Him.

It's an amazing thing. If we're willing to forsake all self-confidence, willing to put our confidence in God, we can actually become the most confident people on the face of the earth. Not arrogant, meek, humble, but confident.

Why? Because though we're convinced by God that we don't have the sufficiency to make a life look like this, we have such trust through Christ toward God. That's what's given to us in the New Covenant. It's not the power of positive thinking.

It's not the positive confession. It's not the name and enclavement. It's God says, here it is.

Will you trust me? Will you turn from self to me? Will you see the shortcoming of your own resources and live by my sufficient resources? Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as being from ourselves. To self and to the flesh, that's devastating. That's not humbling.

That's humiliating. That's crucifying. Well, that's almost like no to self and death to self.

Well, Jesus said in Luke 9.23, that's the way to walk every day. Deny yourself. Take up the cross.

Death to self. You have one option left in that position. You've got to follow Jesus.

There's nothing left. Oh, then the heart's ready to say, but our sufficiency is from God. B-U-T.

That's a great little word when God uses it to shift from our bankruptcy to His abundance. You don't have what it takes, He says, but I do and I'll share it with you in Christ. That's the New Covenant.

Our sufficiency is from God. God who also made us sufficient as servants of the New Covenant. God-given sufficiency through Christ is what is available to servants of the New Covenant.

A covenant not of the letter, that is rules to obey by your own achievement, but rather a covenant of the Spirit. God's resources poured out, planted, engraved in our hearts by the internal work of the Holy Spirit. That's the New Covenant.

How important is that? Again, it's a life or death issue. The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. Some might say, well, why go through all this? Isn't this kind of slicing theological, religious hairs, you know? Well, if this is splitting hairs, one side of the hair is death and the other is life.

That's how important it is. This is a life or death issue. If we do not let the Lord give us ears to hear the difference between living by our sufficiency and God's sufficiency, it's the difference between life and death.

Not only in initial salvation, heaven or hell, life or death, but everyday Christian living. By the way, you probably noticed the verses we're reading aren't about getting saved. They're about the saved growing up and going on, maturing, developing, walking godly.

That kind of life comes from the Spirit of God supplying the sufficiency of God in Christ. It's a life or death issue, eternally and in day by day Christian living. This New Covenant, how could you boil it down in a few phrases? Well, the New Covenant, which is Christian discipleship, abundant life, living in the fullness of the Spirit.

New Covenant living involves renouncing self-sufficiency while relying on God's sufficiency. It involves facing our complete inadequacy within our own resources to live the Christian life, to grow in godliness, but that Christ is fully sufficient for the task. It's facing life like this, I need love, I need joy, I need peace, I need patience, I need perseverance.

Where is it going to come from? My resources or God's resources poured through me. That's the difference. Those who live by the sufficiency of God, their lives are increasingly marked by these characteristics.

This could be said in other ways like John 15, 5. Jesus said, I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me and I in him bears much fruit, for without me you can do nothing. When it comes to fruit

bearing, are the resources of the branch sufficient to bear fruit? No.

For the branch, apart from the vine, the branch can do nothing. How many grapes can a grape branch produce disconnected from the grape vine? Zero. He's the vine, we are the branches.

Apart from him working in and through us, we can do nothing. It's a radical word, nothing. We'd almost accept it if it said, apart from me you can only do half as much as you think you can.

Well, that hurts, but I'll take it. Thanks for that boost, Lord. Lord, my great booster shot, you know.

I do so much so well and I only get so far and he just boosts me that 10% over the hump. Oh, how good God is to me when I fall 10% short. Sounds like we fall 100% short.

Apart from him we can do nothing when it comes to bearing Christ-like fruit. But abiding in Christ, we can bear much fruit. All that we need to bear abundant fruit is right there in the vine.

The vine has sufficient resources. The branches don't. So the life for a branch is to be drawing on the resources of the vine.

It's called abiding, counting on, relating to, looking to, depending on. The same message echoes throughout Scripture. Philippians 4.13 says, I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.

We like the first part of that verse. It's very American. I can do all things.

That's not the message. It's apart from him I can do nothing, but through him I can do anything he wants me to do. If I'll abide in him, trust in him, obey him, depend upon him.

In our grace seminar we saw that living by the grace of God involves humility and faith. God gives grace to the humble. James 4.6, by faith we access this grace in which we stand.

Romans 5.2, humility and faith. Humility says, I can't. Faith says, he can.

We're still on that same territory here. The humility, not that we're sufficient of ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, that's the humble truth we're to embrace. Here's the faith part.

Something to believe and act upon and count on, but our sufficiency is from God. You can trace those two right through the Scriptures. They're always present when God is active, working in and through a life.

Humility and faith. If we'll humbly walk with God, he'll mark our lives with these characteristics, because we'll be drawing upon his sufficiency, and his sufficiency, his abundant resources, which are enough for whatever we face, will have a mighty life-changing impact on who we are and how we function. In conclusion, let's just read this great benediction, the end of a glorious New Testament prayer in Ephesians 3. Ephesians 3.20 and 21.

What do you say to these things of the New Covenant? How can one respond? Here's a great response. Now to him who is able to do exceedingly, abundantly, above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us. What power? The power of the Holy Spirit.

To him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations. How does God get glory in lives that will look like to him and his sufficient resources? That lets him work in and through us. And when that happens, God is glorified, we are built up, and other lives are touched.

That's what the New Covenant is all about. God's sufficiency for godly living. Let's pray together.

Lord God Almighty, we thank you so much for this glorious new and living arrangement where we bring our brokenness, our emptiness, our spiritual bankruptcy, our ineptitude, and you're willing to fill us with your resources fully sufficient for every task and opportunity. Lord, that's the way we want to live. In your holy name, amen.

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