

2 Corinthians 2:2-12 The Sufficiency of Grace
July 4, 2021

The middle of the summer is a very sporting time of the year, even more in this time of Covid pandemic. Just think of all that is happening:

In soccer, the European and South American championships, only held once every 4 years; the Olympic Trials (swimming, gymnastics, and track and field) and later the Olympics, also only held once every four years, and one year behind; running later than usual is the NHL and NBA Championships in basketball and hockey; Wimbledon in tennis; Tour de France in cycling; recent major championships in golf with more coming; College World Series, and of course, the old summertime standard, Major League Baseball, which seems overshadowed by all the rest.

For those who do not care about sports, it is a good time to go outside and work in the garden, or take a walk, perhaps read a good book. For those who do like sports, and I must confess to be in this category, it is a little slice of heaven.

It is a celebration of youth and strength, power, and determination to excel. One must confess that all this competition and striving for physical excellence is a bit of a mirage. It is only for a few years that people can strive in this way, and while they do their lives are unusually focused upon themselves and their own concerns, which is not conducive to good psychological, emotional, and spiritual health.

Beyond even that it magnifies the pitiful weakness of human physical ability. My sport was track and field and I am amazed; the longest jumper can jump less than 10 yards.

Human beings are earthbound, when you really think about it. It is the same with other endeavors. We glorify strength that is not all that strong. For most people the weakness is much more evident. I am willing to bet that most people can't jump at all. Perhaps it is the struggle that is most compelling. Given our pre-occupation with these things, what shall we make of what we have heard from scripture today:

“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness . . . that is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

A look at Paul's background is instructive. We know from the previous chapter in 2 Corinthians about some of Paul's difficulties, speaking of the other apostles:

“I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my

fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches.

Paul is boasting here, and says as much. What's more, in Philipians we read of his accomplishments:

“. . . If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.”

With all that in mind, I wonder what were Paul's ideas about strength and weakness, accomplishments and failures. One wonders about the thorn in his flesh. He says it was to keep him from becoming conceited as if the trouble tempted him to think more highly of himself than he ought.

Let me continue with the Philipians text for a moment, for it may contain a clue:

“I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.”

In our attachment to the present order, we are tempted to compare ourselves to others. In that world a 29 ft long jump is quite remarkable. But when we set our sights on the things above, it is a different story. In the face of heavenly challenges our limitations are exposed. We are earthbound and weak. No matter how ingenious or talented we are, or just how fast and strong, we are helpless and weak.

Except for the mercy of God. By God's grace the heavenly challenges are attained. What we are given here simply is this, that grace is enough. We need not strive for more. Our games are interesting, and not completely devoid of spiritual value, but they are not ultimate.

Our problems are the same. Whether they be personal in nature, or result from our participation in the larger human community, whatever the thorns in the flesh may be, they do not stand in the way of God's grace.

So take a deep breath and get off your own back (and the backs of others too). Let yourself rest, that God's power may rest on you. And if you are unable to delight in weaknesses and all the rest, perhaps at least appreciate its significance, for it is through human weakness that God's power is made manifest, and in the struggle of life that Jesus meets us all.

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