



...there was given me a thorn, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness".
2 Corinthians 12:7-9

There is an incredible amount of preparation that is required of every Olympic athlete: Practice and exercise; practice and exercise; virtually a daily regimen of workouts and coaching and concentrated focus on one goal...to win a gold medal. And yet, as with every Olympics, there is an element of tragedy that befalls so many of the contenders. The simplest of mistakes can turn what is otherwise an extraordinary performance into a losing effort, or even worse, a disqualification. A skater's slip, a coach's miscommunication, a missed gate on the slalom: All of these contribute to a result that depressingly falls short of the mark. We feel sorrow for these athletes because we know that they have worked so hard for so long, only to be knocked out by the slightest bit of chance.

It is not a stretch to compare our spiritual journeys with that of Olympic events. Ice skating, downhill skiing, the slalom, ski jumping, cross-country, the luge, the skeleton - all of these competitions illustrate brilliant metaphors for the obstacles we routinely meet in our Christian lives (Curling may not quite fit this illustration though). We slip, we slide, we fall, we zig-zag, we lunge exhaustedly towards the finish line. As Christians we require daily workouts of devotions and Bible-reading to strengthen our conviction. We practice our faith by applying what we have learned. We share our blessings with those around us, especially the poor and lonely. And yet, we fall short of the mark. Consistently and predictably, we fall short of the mark. The slightest incidents can distract our focus. Satan places thorns, sometimes tiny thorns that annoy us and divert our eyes away from the prize. A slip on an icy sidewalk; a traffic stall; a nasty cold; all of these things take us away from where we need to be. Frequently Satan sends his messengers to torment us: a death in the family or a prolonged unemployment or a severe car accident are circumstances that crack our world and leave a gap that can be very hard to heal and make us question God's love. As weaklings, we provide ample opportunity for the devil to manipulate us as his playthings.

Just when we are frustrated beyond all measure in our wavering efforts to achieve sainthood, we are blindsided by the extraordinary paradox of what our relationship with Christ is: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness"

What? His power is made perfect in weakness? How can that be? Weakness is bad, right? We must be strong, right? We must stand on our own two feet and fight our battles until the very end, or die trying...right?

There is no human understanding of this dichotomy. With amazement, we accept it in faith as an astonishing gift from our celestial God. The devil is beaten at his own game: If we practice and exercise and become strong in our faith, we win. If we practice and exercise and remain feeble in our faith, we win. As weaklings, we provide ample opportunity for God to demonstrate his divine power. It is the ultimate win-win situation.

Dear Heavenly Father,

Make us "Run in such a way as to get the prize." Guide us all to "go into strict training", not so that we will get a "crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever". Direct us so that we "do not run like a man running aimlessly" or "fight like a man beating the air". And if we fail, as always your grace is sufficient for us. Amen.

(Paraphrased from 1 Corinthians 9:24-26)

Lindsey Von of the United States crashing into a fence,
from the LA Times Olympics Collection.

See their stunning set of online photos at:

www.latimes.com/sports/olympics/la-sp-2010-winter-olympics-hi-res-html,1,329113.htmlstory