

<sup>24</sup>Then Jesus said to his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

-- Matt 16:24

<sup>18</sup>For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. <sup>19</sup>For it is written:

"I will destroy the wisdom of the wise;  
the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate."

<sup>20</sup>Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? <sup>21</sup>For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. <sup>22</sup>Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, <sup>23</sup>but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, <sup>24</sup>but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. <sup>25</sup>For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength.

-- 1 Cor 1:18-25

<sup>1</sup> I must go on boasting. Although there is nothing to be gained, I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord. <sup>2</sup> I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know—God knows. <sup>3</sup> And I know that this man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows—<sup>4</sup> was caught up to paradise and heard inexpressible things, things that no one is permitted to tell. <sup>5</sup> I will boast about someone like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses. <sup>6</sup> Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool, because I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain, so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say, <sup>7</sup> or because of these surpassingly great revelations. Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. <sup>8</sup> Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me.

<sup>9</sup> But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. <sup>10</sup> 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.

-- 2 Corinthians 12:1-10

The crowd has been waiting a while. They line the broad street that leads up to gleaming marble buildings and sun-soaked olive trees. Some of the crowd have been bribed to stand there

and wait. Others have come to sell their trinkets. And still more have come to pick the pockets and slit the purses of innocent parade-watchers.

They stand on either side of the valley, waiting, waiting for the Emperor to come. Then above the murmur of the crowd, a trumpet blast, and from somewhere near the Colosseum to the south, starts the noise of hundreds of feet tramping in time. Then, the trumpets blow again, signalling the appearance of the first ranks of troops holding their spears and legion banners high. The Roman soldier is a proud man; strong, blunt-nosed, broad-shouldered, battle-hardened, and possessed of the confidence that he belongs to the greatest army of the greatest empire on earth. The crowd sucks in its breath—these are the backbone of the empire, the gauntleted fist that brings the Pax Romana to the barbarian provinces. *Hail to the victors! Hail to the victors!*

Then comes the treasure—heaps of gold and silver, and precious gems, borne up on gilded palanquins by oiled slaves; growling tigers and groaning bears held in check by masters with whips; dancing girls twirling and spinning their way through like spirits of fire and air. The crowd exhales with pleasure at the sight of the wealth of the Empire, the rightful due of a superior race that dominates all others. *Hail to the victors! Hail to the victors!*

Then, a collective gasp as the sunlight catches something bright: an ivory chariot pulled by a team of matched white horses shines like a new star. And, in this chariot is one who wears a golden breastplate and a purple cloak; the fearless defender of the Republic, the one whose will expands the borders of the Empire, the epitome of manhood and a god incarnate. He holds up his hand, and the crowd roars with approval. *Ave Caesar! Ave Imperator! Hail to the King! Long live the King!* He smiles. This is the conqueror returning to Rome. This is the victor who has crushed the barbarian under his heel. *Ave Caesar! Ave Imperator!*

And then, after another detachment of Praetorian guard, the conquered. Bloodied, bedraggled, little better than beggars, these prisoners of war stumble forward, their wrists and ankles shackled in cast iron chains, their eyes squinting at the glory of the Eternal City. The crowd hisses and holds their nose. *Barbarians! Savages! You deserve to be wiped out! You deserve to be conquered!* The prisoners hang their heads in shame. Once proud chieftains of independent tribes, now they too have succumbed to the will of the Emperor and are led forth to be gloriously eaten alive by lions in the Circus.

These prisoners of war, these captives shambling after the triumphant King, are how Paul describes himself and the other apostles in 2 Cor 2:14—as being led in Christ’s triumphal procession. You may have wondered why I would tell you about ancient Roman victory parades when this appears to have nothing to do with today’s passage. But I hope now you see that as disciples of Christ, we are not leading the procession as victorious soldiers nor even those that tote the spoils of war, but as conquered prisoners sentenced to die. What does it mean, then, to follow Christ except that we follow him to our death?

It is a reality that we will all die. Yet it is not our physical death that we are most afraid of, but the things that we make ourselves up to be and of our hopes and dreams for better to happen on this side of Heaven. It is not so hard to think about heartstop and brainstop; what is immeasurably harder is to contemplate our steady aging, our growing weakness, and how one day we too will have a belt tied around our waist to be led where we do not want to go.<sup>1</sup>

We do not live in a culture that values dependence. All of us have been raised to believe that independence and the strength to stand on our own two feet without help from anyone is the goal of our lives. The Enlightenment philosopher Voltaire once mused that “we must cultivate our garden”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jn 21:18

<sup>2</sup> Voltaire, *Candide*. Lowell Blair, trans. (Bantam Books: New York) 1981, p.120

and find meaning in quiet ambition. Yet this is not the message of the Kingdom of God. We are not to boast of our own brilliance and competence, but rather take to heart in our weaknesses—for it is here, when we are weak, that God is shown.

This is often repeated in Christian circles. I grew up memorizing Bible verses around this very fact. Yet what Sunday School teachers perhaps tried to impress upon me but failed to do was to instruct me in the discipline of entering into pain. I suppose, being the good teachers they are, they might have seen me and thought *“he’ll learn soon enough—and when he does, he’ll learn for good.”* And learn that little boy has—but not without great cost, and not without learning that pain *hurts*.

The Corinthians that Paul writes to here are a people who love the spectacular. Corinth was the site of the Temples of Apollo and Aphrodite and also the Isthmian Games—the ancient precursor to the modern Olympics. Corinth was the Las Vegas of its day, a city bent on razzle dazzle and flash over substance. By contrast, Paul, the quiet-spoken but long-winded, uncharismatic balding rabbi from Palestine, was about as thrilling as mud. The Corinthians much preferred the super-apostles, the snappy dressers with straight teeth and powerful voices to go along with their signs and wonders. They, like many of us today, preferred to follow an image of Christ the conqueror without first having seen Christ the crucified.

What we read here in 2 Corinthians is Paul defending his status as an apostle of Christ not by commending his extravagant visions or multiple good works, but by speaking of his suffering and weakness. For, by his logic, no one in their right minds would ever subject themselves to such humiliation and pain. None, that is, except those who truly follow Christ. The way of Christ is the way of the cross—and the cross is nothing less than utter humiliation, then death.

This is the shift that many of us, lifelong Christians included, fail to make. The Swedish theologian Dorothee Soelle, once wrote that “we are so dominated by the goal of avoiding suffering

that we wall out the world and assume we have a God who does the same. But pain can be good if it furthers the process of its own abolition.”<sup>3</sup> Pain can be good if it helps us be rid of what causes us this pain—our hatred and distrust of God. God does not necessarily want us to be in pain, but if we are to be recast and remade into Christlikeness, fire is required. The true Christian is one who willingly takes up their cross, knowing full well how much it will cost them: everything.

For those of us who believe that the truly Christian life is a pain-free one, consider the example of Christ. “Jesus wept”<sup>4</sup> is the shortest verse in the Bible—an arbitrary designation by translators but an important one nonetheless because it teaches us that if there is one thing that our short memories may grasp, it is that Jesus, fully human and fully God, cries. We sometimes feel as though experiencing pain makes us sub-human. Yet if Jesus feels pain, then pain is not an inhuman indignity but a doorway for something else. It is here that we return to Paul, for he points out that pain is where God’s power is made complete. Weakness is the portal whereby God’s grace enters our lives. Grace is never effective for those who are strong and self-assured—it only ever has been for the truly broken and for those who can bear the disillusionment of themselves as saviours. Those that experience the love and grace of God are those who fall on their faces and cry out, “have mercy on me, a sinner.”

At the core of the Christian life is the conviction that we cannot be independent—indeed, that we never were, but that God Himself has always held us in the palm of His hands. This is not the message of the world, the indoctrination we have suckled on from the day of our birth. We live in a culture that struts about in independence and power, yet the call of Christ is the call to dependence and weakness, not only before God, but before others. A step further into the life of the Kingdom of

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<sup>3</sup> L. Rebecca Propst, “Spirituality and the Avoidant Personality”. *Theology Today*. Vol. 49, No.2, July 1992.

<sup>4</sup> John 11:35

God is to admit that we cannot do it alone, and that we need each other. We always seem to admire those who come and go as they please with busy work and play schedules, but Kingdom people are different. We who belong to Christ openly admit our need not only for God, but for each other.

This is why the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing as they hunger and thirst for self-reliance and autosalvation—but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God.<sup>5</sup>

This is a challenging passage that most of you will go away from thinking “*he was talking about someone else, not about me.*” Yet I speak to you all, for even as much as we think we have entered into our own weakness, there is always the spectre of the sin of independence that sucks the marrow of freedom in Christ from our bones. As much as we think we may have given and given up, there is always more, and we are always far from the Kingdom if we think we earn our salvation by means of self-negation. The doorway to the life of God flowing into us is not through mastering ourselves or asceticism for asceticism’s sake, but by taking on the true *askesis* of following Christ to crosses of our own. This is the discipline of entering into our brokenness and our death.

Yet here is the promise: it is only if we are weak that we allow our gentle God to be strong in us. The sufficiency of God’s grace meets us only in weakness and want. Not in appearing to be, but in being who we are and boasting in our weakness so that somehow, people around us come to understand that God gives grace to the humble, but despises the proud.<sup>6</sup>

1.) How do you attempt to live an independent and self-reliant life?

2.) How has weakness been a part of your life? How is God present to you in your weaknesses?

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<sup>5</sup> 1 Cor 1:18

<sup>6</sup> Jas 4:6, 1 Pet 5:5