

WHEN YOU'RE AT THE TOP OF YOUR GAME

I enjoy life most when I'm at my best! And the way I usually define being at my best is when "I'm at the top of my game." I imagine you're the same as I am: we all like to perform well. We want to excel; it feels good to BE good at what we're doing. We like the idea of being the best employee, the best boss, the best singer, the best golfer, the best provider. Nobody wants to be thought of as mediocre. We all want to be like the citizens of Lake Wobegone: ***"Where the women are beautiful, the men are strong, and all the children are above average."***

Now there's nothing sinful about using the gifts God has given us to the fullest. God gave us those gifts to be used and in that sense, striving to be at the top of our game is a good and moral thing to do. After all, we certainly want the people we are dealing with to be at their best. If we're undergoing surgery we want our surgeon to be at the top of his game.

But the truth is, in our relationships with God and with each other, we're not always at our best when we're at the top of our game. We're not always at our strongest when we're at our strongest. In the economy of God, things work differently than they do in the economy of this world. The Pharisees, for example, who were the brightest and the best of the religious leaders of Israel were also the hardest for Jesus to get through to. And the Apostle Paul, who was a rising star among the Pharisees, was a vicious persecutor of Christians. He even played a role in the stoning of one young Christian by the name of Stephen—all while he was at the top of his game!

It wasn't until he himself had been through countless trials and humiliations that Paul was able to write these words to the members of the church at Corinth: ***"When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God....I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling."*** If anyone had the right to claim that he had "eloquence and superior wisdom," it would have been Paul. He was zealous for the Lord, a natural leader, a persuasive speaker, a brilliant theologian—and his courage was unparalleled. After his

conversion to Christ, he became the most influential Christian evangelist who has ever lived. God even gave him visions and miraculous powers. In Acts 19:11-12 we read: ***“God did extraordinary miracles through Paul, so that even handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched him were taken to the sick, and their illnesses were cured and the evil spirits left them.”***

Paul, you might say, was the first Christian celebrity—a superstar on a par with Billy Graham or Amy Grant. He had a lot to boast about. And he did boast—but not about his strengths. Instead, *Paul boasted about his weaknesses!* He wrote: ***“...[God] said to me: ‘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. 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.”***

Now this really goes against our grain, doesn’t it? There is almost nothing we fear more than weakness and failure. Yet according to Paul, it is precisely our weaknesses and failures that make us useful to God—*by making us vulnerable to God.*

Fortunately, we all have weaknesses and failures—thorns in our flesh, as Paul called them. Thorns of grief and anger over the untimely death of a child or a husband or a wife. Thorns of betrayal over a divorce, long past, that still eat at us. Thorns of desperation when things just KEEP going south. Thorns of humiliation over the loss of a job. All downers. All thorns in our flesh.

Yet Paul rejoiced in the “downers” of his life. He was able to delight in weaknesses and insults and hardships and persecutions and difficulties because he knew that his life was in God’s hands and that God would work good out of every situation in which he found himself. That’s why he was able to write that, ***“...in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to HIS purpose.” ALL THINGS!*** What a radical statement! Even thorns in our flesh, weaknesses in our character and failures in our performance. God can—and does—turn those things around to the surprise of the world and to the glory of His name. Like

Romans
8:28

the cross, wouldn't you say? Looked like failure; saved the world. I love God's sense of irony!

A fellow pastor once described a horrible experience he had had when he was taking a class in pastoral care at the seminary. He had been instructed to visit a woman in the hospital who had lost her will to live. She had so alienated her family and friends with her despair and her bitterness that nobody wanted to visit her anymore. There were no cards or flowers by her bed; she just lay in bed all day in a darkened room—incommunicado. He was nervous about visiting her because he didn't know what to say to her or how she would react to his presence.

The visit went even worse than he had feared. When he entered her room, he pushed the door open too hard and it slammed against the wall. As he was apologizing, he stepped on the tube that connected her to her oxygen supply. He stammered and stuttered and said all the wrong things. There were long periods of uncomfortable silence. She just stared at him. He tried to pray, but even that didn't come out well. He left the room with tears in his eyes, ready to quit the ministry. He felt ashamed and humiliated that he had failed to provide her with any comfort at all.

A few days later he steeled his nerves and went back to apologize. Imagine his surprise when he found the woman sitting up in bed writing letters. Some flowers had appeared and were sitting by her bed. She recognized him at once and began thanking him again and again for the visit he had paid her. He was bewildered by her gratitude because he knew he had botched the visit horribly. He'd done everything wrong and he told her so.

"But that's just it," she replied. "I felt so sorry for you! It was the first time I had felt anything but self-pity for a long time. You lit a spark of compassion in me and it has renewed my desire to live!"

Our weaknesses are often blessings in disguise. They make us approachable. They make us real. Paul prayed again and again to have his weaknesses removed until he finally realized that God could use them to bless other people through him.

Thorns and weaknesses and failures and difficulties in our lives open us up to God. They make us want to have more of God in our lives. Conversely, people who are always strong, always competent, and always in control of things are tempted to feel like they don't have much need for God. What would they need Him FOR? And to experience God, you have to experience a *need* for God.

Some of you will remember the famous catcher for the Brooklyn Dodgers, Roy Campanella. After he had retired from baseball, Roy Campanella was injured in an automobile accident and lost the use of his arms and legs. He became a quadriplegic. Writing in the book, *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, Campanella gives the following testimony: *"We're a rugged breed, us quads. If we weren't, we wouldn't be around today. Yes, we're a rugged breed. In many ways, we've been blessed with a savvy and spirit that isn't given to everybody. Down in the reception room of the Institute of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation, over on the East River at 400 East 34th Street in New York City, there's a bronze plaque that's riveted to the wall. During the months of coming back to the Institute for treatment two or three times a week I rolled through that reception room many times, coming and going. But I never took the time to...read the words on the plaque. They had been written, it was said, by a Confederate soldier. One afternoon I did read it—read it near to bursting, not in despair but with an inner glow that had me straining to grip the arms of my wheelchair. I'd like to share it with you."*

These are the words that Roy Campanella read that day. They are called "A Creed for Those Who Have Suffered":

***I asked God for strength, that I might achieve.
I was made weak, that I might learn humbly to obey***

***I asked for health, that I might do great things,
I was given infirmity, that I might do better things.***

***I asked for riches, that I might be happy
I was given poverty, that I might be wise.***

***I asked for power, that I might have the praise of men.
I was given weakness, that I might feel a need for God.***

***I asked for all things, that I might enjoy life.
I was given life, that I might enjoy all things.***

***I got nothing I asked for, but everything I needed.
Almost despite myself, my unspoken prayers were answered.
I am, among men, the most richly blessed.***

To people who have suffered very little these words will seem like pious platitudes. Some of us might even stumble over the theological questions such a philosophy raises. But those of you who have experienced your own Calvary and who know what it is to be weak, persecuted, insulted and rejected—you know that they ring true. God's power is made perfect in weakness. In weakness we discover our vulnerability and in our vulnerability we discover our need for God. And that's when God can really use us. That's when we're at the top of our game.

Amen.

2 Corinthians 12:7-10

Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. ⁸ Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ 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.

Judges 7:1-9 Gideon Defeats the Midianites

¹ Early in the morning, Jerub-Baal (that is, Gideon) and all his men camped at the spring of Harod. The camp of Midian was north of them in the valley near the hill of Moreh. ² The LORD said to Gideon, "You have too many men. I cannot deliver Midian into their hands, or Israel would boast against me, 'My own strength has saved me.' ³ Now announce to the army, 'Anyone who trembles with fear may turn back and leave Mount Gilead.'" So twenty-two thousand men left, while ten thousand remained.

⁴ But the LORD said to Gideon, "There are still too many men. Take them down to the water, and I will thin them out for you there. If I say, 'This one shall go with you,' he shall go; but if I say, 'This one shall not go with you,' he shall not go."

⁵ So Gideon took the men down to the water. There the LORD told him, "Separate those who lap the water with their tongues as a dog laps from those who kneel down to drink." ⁶ Three hundred of them drank from cupped hands, lapping like dogs. All the rest got down on their knees to drink.

⁷ The LORD said to Gideon, "With the three hundred men that lapped I will save you and give the Midianites into your hands. Let all the others go home." ⁸ So Gideon sent the rest of the Israelites home but kept the three hundred, who took over the provisions and trumpets of the others.