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BATTING NOT SO AVERAGE

It is spring again, when the tulips bloom, the rains come, and a young man's thoughts lightly turn to baseball. It is also when this old man's thoughts turn to destroying his already fragile knees by playing softball. Some people say that baseball is like life; others of us say that baseball *is* life.

It has also been said that baseball is the only sport in which you are considered great if you are only successful one-third of the time. The hardest thing in sports is to hit a round ball going faster than a car on a Texas highway with a round bat, and hit is squarely enough to miss nine strategically placed men. The holy grail of seasonal batting averages, the ratio of hits to times at bat, is to bat .400, to get four hits for every ten official at-bats. In professional baseball nobody has ever come close to even getting a hit half the time over a season. Most professional hitters are successful only between one-fourth and one-third of the time.

If baseball is life there must be a lesson for all of us in that. Is it really possible to be great in failure? If so, how do we react when we fail?

Everybody fails. Show me a person who is old enough to understand right from wrong and I will show you someone who has failed; failed to resist temptation. "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." (1 Jn 1:8) I have sinned; you have sinned; he/she has sinned; we have sinned; y'all have sinned; they have sinned. No matter how you conjugate the verb, the fact remains that everybody sins.

Further, everybody has their own batting average when it comes to sin. When temptation knocks, some people fling the door wide open. Others wait for the second or third knock, and some people are able to resist for quite a while. We are, however, children of our father Adam. "Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned." (Rom 5:12) Later in his discussion of sin and forgiveness, Paul admits that there are problems that bring his average down. "For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do. Now if I do that I would not, it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me." (Rom 7:19-20) They say that Ted Williams (the last man to reach that .400 seasonal

average) could see the ball as if it was in slow motion. Yet there was something in him, like in Paul, that kept him from nearing perfection. He could see the ball better than anyone else, but he still couldn't hit it. Paul could even recognize temptation and yet fail to hit it away. He achieved greatness, but not perfection in himself.

So, how are we to react when we fail? If I can't bat 1.000 do I just stop swinging at all? Did Babe Ruth stop trying to hit when he knew that he could not get a home run every time? Not at all! Pitchers (at least since Ruth) have the reputation of being the worst hitters. After all, when you come to bat only once every five days (or not at all in "the league that cheats"—the American League) you can't be expected to hit as well as the guy who comes to bat three or four times a day. Yet pitchers take batting practice. Even if they can't hit .300 they don't want to hit .000 either. When Steve Trout was pitching for the Chicago Cubs he sometimes took up to 200 swings in batting practice—a high number even for some regular hitters. If he didn't know the scriptures he at least knew Paul's mind. "I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus." (Php 3:14) Just because we can't be perfect, we don't give up. We do the best we can.

There is one significant difference between baseball and life. While it is impossible to have a perfect batting average in baseball, and impossible to be perfect in life, we can still be on the record books as batting 1.000. "If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin." (1 Jn 1:7) Because Jesus was perfect, we are credited with being perfect. Now, why can't my batting average be like that?

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THE VOICE OF THE LORD

Give unto the LORD, O ye mighty, give unto the LORD glory and strength.

Give unto the LORD the glory due unto his name; worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness.

The voice of the LORD is upon the waters: the God of glory thundereth: the LORD is upon many waters. The voice of the LORD is powerful; the voice of the LORD is full of majesty.

The voice of the LORD breaketh the cedars; yea, the LORD breaketh the cedars of Lebanon.

He maketh them also to skip like a calf; Lebanon and Sirion like a young ox.

The voice of the LORD kindleth the flames of fire.

The voice of the LORD shaketh the wilderness; the LORD shaketh the wilderness of Kadesh.

The voice of the LORD maketh the hinds to calve, and strippeth the forests bare: and in his temple doth every one speak of his glory.

The LORD sitteth upon the flood; yea, the LORD sitteth King for ever.

The LORD will give strength unto his people; the LORD will bless his people with peace.

Psalm 29

God's royal garment is magnificent; it is holiness.

David wrote some of the most powerful descriptions of God's glory. Only Habakkuk chapter 3 and Jonah chapter 2 come close to the theophanies of David. (Theophany: a description of a visible manifestation of God.) A longtime friend of mine asked me to write about the above psalm. How could I refuse? This is one of the finest descriptions of God's power in all of scripture.

Ascribe Unto the Lord

David begins not with a description of God but a command to us to give God the glory. In fact, the first verse commands the "mighty" to acknowledge one superior even to them. These mighty ones may be the rulers of men, or the heroes of men. David's own elite corps was known as the "mighty men." One translation (by the Jewish Publication Society) goes so far as to call the "mighty" in this verse divine beings. Whether gods, demons, or men, it is still true that God

is higher than the highest, and deserving of praise from high and low alike.

The sweet psalmist uses three words/phrases here for attributes we are to ascribe to God. The first is glory. It may be also called honor or majesty. The God above all gods and King above all kings is worthy of all honor. Verse two emphasizes that this glory is merely his due. There is no other who is worthy of honor. No king of earth is more majestic. Even the sun, in all its glory, is a mere shadow to the glory of God. "The sun and moon stood still in their habitation." (Hab 3:11)

The second word is strength. Not for nothing is God frequently called the Almighty. Combine the power of Jack LaLanne, Governor Schwarzenegger, Charles Atlas, and Hulk Hogan in their primes and you have a strand of a cobweb compared to the might of God. "And the LORD brought us forth out of Egypt with a mighty hand, and with an outstretched arm, and with great terribleness, and with signs, and with wonders." (Deut 26:8) Who else is so great that he can take his people away from the most powerful nation in the world?

The final phrase is "beauty of holiness." The beauty described here is the garment of royalty. Although I was a mere baby when Queen Elizabeth II had her coronation, and thus did not see it, I have seen pictures of her regalia. If the wife of a President Elect were to dress like that she would be accused of extravagance. Yet God is dressed in even greater magnificence. He is dressed in holiness. His clothing is the opposite of that in "The Emperor's New Clothes." Holiness is real, and beautiful. God is truly dressed in splendor. But like in that story, there are some who can't see the obvious. David says that we must acknowledge God's holiness.

The Voice of the Lord

The next section of the psalm describes God by his voice. When you can't recognize a person because you can't see his face, you can certainly recognize someone you know by his voice. Just ask any mother to find her child among several speaking in the next aisle of a store. So those who know God can recognize him by his voice. And what a voice!

God's voice is like Niagara Falls. That landmark is known for its thunderous noise. Yet God is louder than the falls. His voice is so much greater than the waters that he can control them with it. "And God said, Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters. And God made the firmament, and divided the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament: and it

was so.” (Gen 1:6-7) A day later he also separates the water from the land. “Who shut up the sea with doors, when it broke forth, ... and said, Hitherto shalt thou come, but no further and here shall thy proud waves be stayed?” (Job 38:8,11) Legend says Persian King Xerxes ordered the tide to stop. Legend further says that he was unsuccessful. Yet God is strong enough to keep the tide in its place.

God’s voice has power, certainly. But that power is coupled with majesty. God is no mere creator. Yes, the power of his word is great. Combined with majesty, it is overwhelming. His voice demands that we listen, and obey.

In Siberia there is a crater. The best guess is that it is the result of the largest meteor strike ever to hit the earth. Around that crater there is evidence of fallen trees. Each tree for miles in the radius of the circle centered on the crater is laying with its top pointing away from the center. This was no small event. Some even believe it changed the orbit of the earth. One meteor strike was able to fell thousands upon thousands of trees. In Palestine there was no tree more noted than the cedar of Lebanon. It still appears on the flag of that country. Tall, perfectly straight, and strong, the cedars were used for masts of ships, and were the core of Solomon’s Temple. God doesn’t even have to say a complete word and the cedars of Lebanon will fall. Not only is God more powerful than mighty waters. He is more powerful than a speeding meteor.

Have you ever seen a hypnotist’s show? One of the standard tricks is that he will take a volunteer from the audience, hypnotize him, and make him bark like a dog or quack like a duck. He will make him walk around the stage flapping his arms like a chicken. (Of course, I have seen DJs at a party do that just by playing “The Chicken Dance.”) It can be pretty amazing when a hypnotist does this to one person. David says that God does this with whole governments. He makes Lebanon and Syria jump around like young calves. In David’s day, these were two of the greatest powers in the world. A couple of hundred years later, Ben-Hadad of Syria would be a serious threat to the kingdoms of Israel and Judah.

And Benhadad the king of Syria gathered all his host together: and there were thirty and two kings with him, and horses, and chariots: and he went up and besieged Samaria, and warred against it. (1 Kings 20:1)

Syria was a power to be reckoned with. An alliance with thirty-two kings makes for one powerful government. Yet just a few verses later we read, “And the king of Israel went out, and smote the horses and chariots, and slew the Syrians with a great slaughter.” (1 Kings 20:21) This was God’s doing, because he could make Syria jump around like a young ox. The Syrians underestimated God, and suffered for it. May we never

make the same mistake with a God that controls governments like puppets.

The voice of the Lord can bring fire. In 1 Kings 18 Elijah challenges the prophets of Baal. The one who could set up a sacrifice and fire come out of heaven and consume it would be considered the prophet of the true God. Needless to say, Elijah won. God sent his fire to consume not just the sacrifice, but also the altar and the water that had been poured on it. The same God who speaks in the waters consumes with fire.

David now addresses God’s voice shaking the wilderness and Kadesh. While many scholars think he is talking about Kadesh-bar-Nea in the south of Israel, the context would indicate that he is probably referring to the city of Kadesh in southern Syria. This was the site of a significant, though inconclusive, battle between the Hittites and Ramesses II of Egypt. Just as this part of Syria had been shaken by two great armies, so Syria could again be shaken by God. This is the same God who causes animals to give birth and the seasons to change. God’s voice alone, even without all his other attributes, is enough to make people praise him.

Xerxes couldn’t stop the tide, but God keeps it in its place.

The Throne of the Lord

I have heard of thrones covered in gold. I have heard of thrones made entirely of elephant ivory. I have heard of velvet thrones. This is the first place I know that tells of a throne made of water. God sits as king forever on the flood.

While it may be unusual to set up a throne on the flood, it seems appropriate for God. After all, this is a being described as riding on the wind (Ps 104:3). David has already said that he has the voice of many waters. We have seen that he commands the waters. What would be wrong with sitting on them?

I think David may here be referring back to Genesis as well. Heaven is the throne of God. When he divided the waters on the second day of creation, heaven was above the waters. So the throne of God is above the waters, as David says here.

Psalm 29 describes God’s glory, his powerful voice, and his unusual throne. David ends with hope for man. This is a mighty God, the Almighty. Still, he loves his people. We can count on that strength to aid us. God is powerful, but he cares for his people. He gives us strength, and with it he gives us peace.

DON'T SWEAT IT

What is important to you? What do you worry about, fret about, or obsess about? For some people that would be their jobs. On those rare occasions you find them away from work they are still thinking about work. You ask them how they are, they will launch into a blow-by-blow account of what is happening on the job. Never mind that wasn't the question. They define themselves by their jobs.

To some people their cars or property is important. I heard of one man who bowed to his car every Sunday before he spent hours washing and waxing it. There are people who work hard to keep their lawn the perfect height, the perfect green, the perfect weedlessness. I have been in houses where I doubted that the owners ever had children. The house was spotless, and you were afraid even to sit in the chairs.

There is nothing wrong with working at a job. It is a good thing to keep a clean car, lawn, or house. There is a difference, though, between routine cleanliness and hovering around someone with a dustpan lest he drop a single cookie crumb on the carpet. To some such things are supremely important. To others they seem small matters. (Yes, this is coming from a self-confessed slob.)

This difference between big and small extends into other areas of our lives, as well. Probably the biggest conflicts between parents and children are over things that one considers highly important and the other considers a small matter. At what age should a girl start wearing makeup? When do the kids start dating? Do I have to eat peas or broccoli? Can I get my tongue pierced or a tat [tattoo] on my ankle? What's wrong with smoking a little pot? So what if I was half and hour late for my curfew? Each of these questions

may be huge for one, while the other is wondering what is the big deal.

That list of questions may serve as examples to show that there are some things that may actually be important. Parents should take a stand on the big issues, like drugs and dating. We do have to make some hard decisions based on our values. There are some issues that really are small. Will it kill a child never to eat broccoli? (I have done fine without it.) If health issues are not a problem, is a tattoo or a piercing worth alienating a child over? (It may be, but each person has to decide that based on their own values.) Somebody once suggested asking, "will this matter in a year?" If a year from now you won't remember one meal left unfinished, one crumb on the carpet, or a scratch on the car you traded away six months ago, then it probably is pretty petty.

Jesus admonishes us to decide what is truly important and what is really a petty matter.

Therefore take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed? (For after all these things do the Gentiles seek:) for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things. But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you. (Matt 6:31-33)

Many of us would consider our next meal a big issue. Jesus says that a year (or eternity) from now you won't remember a skipped meal. If you have shoes on your feet now, why worry that you can't have that pair of Air Jordans?

Someone else said it differently. "Don't sweat the petty things, and don't pet the sweaty things." And beyond following God, it's all petty things.

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