

## **2 Corinthians 12:2-10**

I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven— whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. And I know that such a person—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows— was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat. On behalf of such a one I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. But if I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me, even considering the exceptional character of the revelations. Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given to me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.’ So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

### **“When the Ordinary Becomes Extra”**

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These words are from the author *Anne Frank Remembered*, Meip Gies. "My story is a story of very ordinary people during extraordinarily terrible times, times the like of which I hope with all my heart will never, never come again. It is for all of us ordinary people all over the world to see to it that they do not." Rodney Collin in his book *The Theory of Conscious Harmony* writes this: "The physical body was given by nature at our birth. Somewhere exists the original divine spark, launched from God, which, re-found, will be our conscious spirit."

It's the 5<sup>th</sup> of July, an important date, but we have to think about it. We are, because God is. Thinking about this guy who missed his wedding anniversary, and his wife was angry - I was not the guy, by the way - He forgot it. She said, "Tomorrow morning I expect to find a gift in the driveway. And that gift better be something that goes from zero to a hundred in less than six seconds." The next morning he got up early, left for work. When his wife woke up, she looked out the window and there it was, a small gift-wrapped box in the driveway. She was confused but she put on her robe, ran out to the driveway, brought the box back into the house. She opened it, and she found a brand-new bathroom scale. Which did, as she demanded, zero to a hundred in less than six seconds. He should have thought about it. An important anniversary. What does it mean? How must it be celebrated? And the day after? Zero to a hundred in less than six seconds.

Sometimes when events are big, we need some time to think about them, to get them right in our heads, and that's what we're going to do today, the 5<sup>th</sup> of July. An important day, following the 4<sup>th</sup> of July. The 5<sup>th</sup> of July following the 4<sup>th</sup> of July on a Sunday, which is the first Sunday of the month, the 5<sup>th</sup> of July following the 4<sup>th</sup> of July on a Sunday in a church that celebrates Communion on the first Sunday of the month. We have some time

to think about it. We have some time to get it right in our minds. Zero to a hundred in twenty minutes. See, the 4<sup>th</sup> of July is a time for flag waving, a time for looking back with pride. Paul the Apostle did some flag-waving, I think, when he wrote, "I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up into the third heaven. I know that such a person was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no human is permitted to repeat, on behalf of such a one I will boast." Bragging about a friend, flag-waving, looking back at our heroes, the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, the day of independence, the struggle for our freedom, the importance that we have, we have to preserve the freedom, firework displays, patriotic songs, flag-waving, fire-cracking, song-singing, we stand a little taller and walk with a little more purpose on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July as we remember people like Pat. A farmer, a poor farmer, little interest in education, married against his parents' wishes, studied law. Did that for six weeks, hated every minute of it, accidentally passed the bar exam, nobody knows how, became a legislator in Virginia, thought there ought to be a militia, accused of treason against England, Pat stood up and said, "Shall I keep my opinion at such a time through fear of giving offense? I shall then consider myself guilty of treason." And then Pat said, "Why stand we here idle? What is it that you wish? What would you have? Is life so dear, or peace so sweet as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery? Forbid it, Almighty God." And Patrick Henry said, "I do not know what course others may take, but as for me, give me liberty or give me death."

4<sup>th</sup> of July is a time for flag-waving, a time to look back. I remember the story of the old man who walked into the barber shop. The young barber invited him to sit for his haircut, and he sat, and wrapped him up in that barber sheet. The old man said to the young barber, "What do you have for gray hair?" The young barber answered, "For gray hair, I have a lot of respect." We look to those who have made our freedom possible.

The British were about to take New York. The island was surrounded. Boston had been defeated, New York was doomed, a fire broke out, major part of the city burned. What were the British doing? When were they going to attack? A fifty-year old mother of 12, we know her name, she served the British officers tea, and detained them while Washington escaped. A young captain disguised as an unemployed schoolmaster was sent out to spy. His name was Nate. Nate was captured on Long Island. In his possession, incriminating evidence. He was examined by the general. He was found guilty by the British. Orders were given. He was to be hanged, and when Nate went to the gallows he spoke, and for the first time revealed that he was a captain in the Continental Army. Unknown to anyone around him, without a single friend, his dying observation, Nate Hale, Nathaniel Hale, "I regret that I have only one life to lose for my country."

Flag-waving. The 4<sup>th</sup> of July is a time for flag-waving. One woman who went to the local airport and took a tour of those bombers they have on exhibit there said, "When I'm having a bad day, I'm going to think about those poor folks, those souls who sat in those closed-in spaces, in that bubble window with the machine gun, I'm going to think about that when I'm having a bad day. The Korean War, the one that we never called a war, the Vietnam War, where the heroes were not praised for what they did, the Middle East, Iraq, Afghanistan, flag-waving, how much flag-waving. In Craig Nelson's book Rocket Men, there's this interview with Neil Armstrong. The book is about the moon landing, and a

reporter asked Neil Armstrong before the historic flight, "Why, really, are we doing this? Why are we going to the moon?" And Armstrong answered, "I think we're going to the moon because it's in the nature of human beings to face big challenges." By the nature of our deep inner soul, we are required to do such things. How much flag-waving on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July? I suppose there is a limit. The men at the Bible Study at The Egg and I Restaurant, six-thirty in the morning on Friday. We're in this room, and beside us is this patio area, and there are windows, and the windows were open, and that particular day, two weeks ago, they put people in the patio area. The men in the men's Bible Study were talking, maybe a little flag-waving, perhaps a little boasting, discussing our wives, reading Ezekiel, maybe a little loud. Anyway, the management came in and closed the windows, so the people in the patio wouldn't have to listen. How much flag-waving on the 4<sup>th</sup>? How much?

It's like the grandmother who was dishing out ice cream to her granddaughter, or grandson, that could happen in a few years, and Grandma said to the granddaughter, "How much ice cream would you like, Sweetie?" The granddaughter looked up at her grandmother and said, "Give me too much." We look back, we wave our flags, too much perhaps, on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July. But there's something deeper, maybe even more important, not only flag-waving but soul-searching. "I boast of my weakness. I am content," he said, "of my weakness, for wherever I am weak, then I am strong." The thorn in my flesh. Miep Gies, the hero, sheltered little Anne Frank and her family against the Nazis in Amsterdam, preserved and helped get printed that wonderful manuscript that became one of the most beautiful pieces of literature. In *The Diary of Anne Frank*, she writes, "My story is a story of very ordinary people doing extraordinary things at an extraordinarily terrible time." Ordinary people. Soul-searching. We look inward on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July. And it's all about the extraordinary deeds done by ordinary people.

Emma had no idea what would happen to her poem. A rich girl who did some soul-searching and took up the cause of immigrants in New York, she wrote a poem. It was printed eventually in a prominent place, but she never saw it. She died before it was recognized, and she never saw it printed. Just an ordinary girl who did some soul-searching. "Send the wretched refuse of your teeming shores. Send them the homeless, the tempest-tossed, to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door." And then those words that we now, all of us, I think, "Give me your tired, your poor, you huddled masses yearning to be free." Emma Lazarus would have liked where they put her poem, on the statue, in the harbor in New York.

David McCullough in his book *1776* reminds us how George Washington felt so ill-equipped for the task that they had given him. And Gary Wills in his book *Certain Trumpets* writes, "Washington began as a client in the aristocratic circles of Fairfax. He went on to be the first general to win a modern revolutionary war, then President of an entirely new nation, and he ended up Citizen Washington." If we look at other revolutionary leaders, we have to consider that, even harder to give up power it is than to acquire it. Ordinary people. He gave up power. How hard that is. Soul-searching. Soul-searching. Last Sunday I announced that our church was named the fastest-growing church in the Rocky Mountain Conference, and I said, I don't know if I've mentioned it in

this service, that our library has been selected as the best library of any church or synagogue in the country. And last week I announced that our softball team beat the Timberline church. This past Tuesday we played Timberline's best team. They heard about us, and we lost 30-3.

Soul-searching. In our weakness there is strength. Ordinary people doing extraordinary things. The 4<sup>th</sup> of July is a time for soul-searching. When Lou Holtz was the coach at Notre Dame, he had to have emergency neck surgery and the possibility was that he would be paralyzed completely. That experience made him re-evaluate his life and his priorities, and he said, "There's a lot of pressure at Notre Dame. A lot of pressure you put on yourself, and people are always comparing you with other people, and that's never good. I can't be anybody else but myself, and maybe I haven't done that as well as I should, in recent times." Soul-searching. What have we become? What will we be? Our strength grows from our weakness. Emerson said it too. So did Paul the Apostle. "I am only one, but I am still one. I cannot do everything, but I can do something, and because I cannot do everything, I will not refuse to do something that I can do because of the somethings that I can't," Edward Everett Hale said. And Mary Pickford said, "You may have a fresh start with your life any moment that you choose, for this thing we call failure is not the falling down but the staying down."

Ordinary people. Looking in, we see the thorn in our flesh. We see weakness, and in our weakness there is strength. On the 4<sup>th</sup> of July we are ordinary people. But now it's the 5<sup>th</sup> of July, and it's the first Sunday of the month, and this is a church that invites us to the table on the first Sunday of the month. And when we come to the table, the first Sunday of July, on the 5<sup>th</sup>, we see it. We see the flag up here by the pulpit. But there's another flag on the other side, the Christian flag, and we recall something Samuel Adams said. He said, "We may look to armies for our defense, but virtue is our best security. It is not possible that any state should long remain free, where virtue is not supremely honored." And Reinhold Niebuhr had it right when he said, "Ultimately considered, evil is done not so much by evil people but by good people who just don't know themselves."

At the table with our flag waving, we're God-fearing. We are because God is. We are people who are passionate about our country, and following the call of the cross that leads us to the love of the Lord, and our patriotism is elevated by our faith, and our defense of nation is driven by our trust in God. When we come to the table on the 5<sup>th</sup> of July, we are because God is. But we leave the table on the first Sunday of the month, the 5<sup>th</sup> of July, with our soul-searching comes our strength-finding. When we leave the table with our soul-searching, ordinary people, thorn in the flesh people, losing 30 - 3 people, it's the light that shines on our brokenness people, it's strength that comes in our weakness people. Like the grumpy church organist - not the one we have - the grumpy church organist who complained, "No matter how loud I play, I can still hear the people singing." No matter how hard life is, you can still hear Anne Frank writing, at the heart of it all, "I still believe people are good." No matter how many mistakes we've made, we can still hear God forgiving. No matter how dark the night, we can still see the dawn coming. No matter what they say cannot be done, we can still see people trying to do it. Soul-searching. We are weak, but we are strong. Flag-waving. We love our country, but our

country, one nation under God, with liberty and justice for all. When we come to the table, we remember God and country. Because God is, we are. And we leave the table, we are strong. We are, and God is ours. Flag-waving, soul-searching, on the 5<sup>th</sup> of July. Just a little different than on the 4<sup>th</sup>. Let us pray.

Oh God, may we never become so patriotic that we make our flag an idol. And yet, may we never forget the freedom that we have, and the good that is ours, because we live where we do. And may we never forget those who have gone before us, who have made certain that our freedom is intact. Be with us as we gather at the table. Help us with our priorities. Help us search our souls. Help us move to the future, confident and sure that you are with us. Amen.