

## TRUE GRIT

SHERARD EDINGTON

Romans 5:1-5

In 1992, at the Summer Olympics in Barcelona, Spain, Derek Redmond was about to compete in the semi-final round of the 400m race.

Derek Redmond is a British athlete. He was born in 1965. In 1985, at the age of 20, he broke the British record for the men's 400m race. When I ran track in high school, I competed in the 440 yard dash. 440 yards is exactly a quarter-mile—one lap around the track. 400m is essentially the same being just 2.5 yards shorter than a quarter-mile. They don't run the 440 anymore. It is officially "obsolete." That is happening with a lot of things in my life.

So, in 1985, Redmond set the British record in the 400m race. In 1986, he was part of a British team that won the gold at the European Championships in the 4x400m relay. In 1987, his relay team won silver at the World Championships in Rome.

In 1988, he represented Britain at the Summer Olympics in Seoul, South Korea. Tragically, just moments before starting the 400m race he had to pull out because of an injured Achilles tendon. He was not able to run in those Olympics.

After several surgeries, in 1991, he was back on the British relay team that won gold in the 4x400m in the World Championships in Tokyo. His British team beat the highly favored team from the United States.

In 1992, Redmond was again representing Britain at the Summer Olympics, this time in Barcelona, Spain. By now, Redmond had undergone eight surgeries to address various injuries. In Barcelona, in the first round of the 400m race, Redmond posted the fastest time of all the runners. In the quarter-final round, he won his heat and was favored to win the gold. In the semi-final round, he started strong, but halfway through the race, fell to the track with a torn hamstring. The medics rushed toward the track to carry him away on a stretcher, but he waved them off. He stood up and began to hobble the remaining 150 meters to the finish. It didn't look he was going to make it. A man in the audience jumped the rail and ran onto the track. A race official tried to stop him but was pushed back. The man ran to Redmond and took his arm onto his shoulder and helped him toward the finish. This man was his father, Jim Redmond. Leaning on his father, Redmond is sobbing in pain and disappointment. When they reached the finish, the 65,000 spectators stood up and cheered.

Unfortunately, because of the assistance from his father, Redmond was disqualified. Officially, for that race, he is listed as Did Not Finish. But it doesn't

matter because he would never race again. He eventually recovered from that injury and played other sports, including basketball and rugby, but he could never again run at the elite level.

Today, Redmond is a British sports celebrity. He works with British athletics, is a sports commentator, and gives motivational speeches. His story has been retold many times, including in an ad campaign by VISA credit card for the 2008 Olympics. The ad is even narrated by the great Morgan Freeman. Personally, I would rob a bank and do prison time if you promised me my story would be narrated by Morgan Freeman.

In our reading for today from Paul's Letter to the Romans, Paul talks about boasting. Earlier in this letter, Paul includes boasting in a long list of the sinful activities of the ungodly. He clearly looks down on boasting. Paul is writing to the members of the church in Rome and he says to them that as followers of Christ there are, however, some things that we should boast about. One of these is our suffering.

For Paul, Christian suffering is not about our ailments or misfortunes. It is about reflecting Christ in our lives. As a missionary, Paul himself suffered greatly. He was imprisoned, beaten, whipped, shipwrecked, endured hunger and thirst, and more. He suffered these things in order to share God's glory. Instead of complaining, Paul recalled that Christ suffered more. To suffer is to give up the worldly way of life in favor of a Christian life. It is how we use our time. Instead of putting ourselves first, we put others ahead of us. We set aside part of the day to help others. We volunteer at a school, we work with foster children, we support veterans—we do things in God's name that are beyond ourselves. It doesn't necessarily mean that we are suffering in pain, but just that we are giving something up.

In his letter to Rome, Paul argues that suffering produces endurance (or perseverance). Endurance produces character. Character produces hope. This progression from suffering to hope is easy to recognize with athletes such as Derek Redmond. To be an athlete one has to train and practice. This is physically demanding and can be painful. To progress in athletics requires suffering. However, as you train and become stronger, you gain endurance. A runner who trains can run farther; the dancer who trains can jump higher. This endurance produces character and in time, an athlete learns to differentiate between types of suffering. A runner learns to "run through the pain." A baseball player learns how to "walk it off." Learning to fight through these obstacles, as Paul puts it, produces character. And character produces hope. At a certain point, an athlete begins to see beyond the horizon at what might be possible for them. They develop a hope that they can do greater things.

It is easy to talk about athletes in this way. Athletics are something that can be observed and measured. With good training and coaching a swimmer will get faster, a weight-lifter will get stronger, a gymnast will become more agile. But what about the rest of us? Athletics is simple; life, on the other hand, can be messy. Do Paul's words apply to the rest of us?

Those of you in the field of education may be familiar with the work of Angela Duckworth. Duckworth was a teacher and taught middle school math in the New York City public schools. As a teacher, she noticed what all teachers notice, that the brightest students or the quickest learners don't necessarily make the best grades. Many times the high grades go to those kids who possess another quality.

Duckworth left the classroom and returned to school to earn her PhD in psychology. She continued to study the question of what makes people successful, what is that quality that brings success? Her research took her to West Point, to the National Spelling Bee, to private companies where she studied the salespeople, all the while trying to figure out how to predict which people would succeed—who would make it through West Point, who would win the Spelling Bee, who could make it in sales.

What Duckworth determined is that the people who succeed aren't necessarily the smartest or the most talented or the most well-connected or the best looking. What she observed is that the successful have a quality that she calls grit. As she explains in a TED Talk, "Grit is passion and perseverance for very long-term goals. Grit is having stamina. Grit is sticking with your future, day in, day out, not just for the week, not just for the month, but for years, and working really hard to make that future a reality. Grit is living life like it's a marathon, not a sprint."

We all know people who are smart and talented but who for one reason or another lack the follow-through necessary to accomplish something special. Duckworth would say that they lack grit. And we also know people who have a spark in their eyes, a determination in their manner that indicates that they will never give up. They are gritty.

In our lives as Christians, what is it that will make us successful, what makes Christians gritty? What Paul writes in Romans mirrors what Angela Duckworth outlines in her research. Paul talks about suffering, endurance, character, and hope. Duckworth talks about persistence and passion. Paul's understanding of suffering and endurance is not too far from Duckworth's persistence. The student who succeeds is the one who does not give up easily, who sticks with the task for the long haul, who works through the problems until they understand them. The Christian who succeeds is the one who remains faithful even in the face of hardship and adversity. They are not the ones who say, "I gave my life to Christ, but then I lost my job, so I quit." They are the ones who have learned to put their trust in God, no matter what life throws at them.

In addition to persistence, the second quality of grit is passion. Duckworth explains that perseverance is necessary for success, but there is also needed a passion for a singular pursuit. Passion is an abiding interest. Passion leads us to do something over and over until we get it right. Passion makes us practice the piano for hours at a time, hit a thousand tennis balls a day, make cold calls until we get a sale. For Paul, passion can be equated with character. A person of character is one with a passion to do what is right, a passion to follow God's will, a passion live in accordance with the teachings of Christ, a passion to suffer for Christ. That is a person with character.

And what I found most astonishing is that in the end Paul and Duckworth arrive at the very same place—hope. According to Duckworth, gritty people also have hope. They're optimistic about the future and their ability to improve and affect change. As Christians, we understand hope. Paul writes that after suffering, endurance, and character, there comes hope. Hope, he says, does not disappoint us. Why does hope not disappoint? Because *God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit.*

What is it that triggers grit in a person? Duckworth admits that she does not know. The person who succeeds will recognize that it is because of their own hard work that they accomplished what they did. However, in the realm of faith, Paul reminds us that it is not ourselves we thank but something beyond us. Christians can be gritty because the Holy Spirit has come to us filling our hearts with the love of the Father. It is because of this love that we have hope, hope for a future we cannot attain on our own. We have hope because we know that our God loves us and God pours his love into our hearts.

In 2012, the Summer Olympics were held in London. In commemoration of Derek Redmond's race—one of the most stirring moments in Olympic history—the British chose Redmond as one of the people to carry the Olympic torch through London. But they did not choose Derek Redmond, they chose Jim Redmond, his father, to carry that torch. After all of Derek's training and suffering and heartbreak and persistence to complete the race—all of his grit—in the end, it was the father who helped him to the finish line.

On this Trinity Sunday, that is what we celebrate, the presence of the Father, and the Son, and the Spirit in our lives, giving us strength, giving us hope, giving us grit to be people of faith. Amen.