

IN OUR WEAKNESS

On those occasions when I am at home, the Television is on a lot. I know they say you are not supposed to do that- that the television interferes with your concentration- but I like the background noise. Among my favorite programs to watch are science shows- particularly space shows. I guess it all started with Star Trek. I loved that show as a child. It was about the same time that the moon landings were underway. Space was on everyone's mind. As a child it certainly had a powerful effect on my mind. I have followed the space program all my life.

While the moon landings were obviously the pinnacle of the manned space program, it is not so easy to pinpoint the most impressive achievement in the field of unmanned space flight. Some candidates for the top spot would be the twin Mars Rovers: Spirit and Opportunity, the landing on Mercury- which proved extraordinarily difficult even to get to, and the New Horizons mission- which is scheduled to flyby Pluto next year and continue on to the Kuiper Belt.

For my money, the voyager mission is the pinnacle of the unmanned space program. Voyager I and Voyager II represent the only instance in history where humanity has created a device that has left the solar system.

It may surprise you to learn that, at present, we couldn't repeat the mission if we wished to do so. With the chemical rockets that we employ, we can only get out about as far as the orbit of Jupiter. As it happens the Voyager mission was planned to take advantage of a rare alignment of the outer planets Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus and Neptune. This alignment only occurs once every 176 years. The two Voyager probes travelled to Jupiter and used its gravity to slingshot to Saturn, using its gravity in turn to slingshot to Uranus and so forth. The gravity of Neptune was used to slingshot into the interstellar void. It was truly a remarkable technological feat.

But when we put this feat in its true perspective it doesn't seem so impressive after all. As Voyager passed Saturn on its way out of the system, it turned around to take a picture of Saturn's rings. In that photograph, if you closely, you can see a small point about the size of a period. The point has come to be called the pale blue dot. That pale blue dot is the planet earth.

It's mind-boggling when you think about it. Every person you have ever known, every book you have ever read, every piece of artwork or work of nature you have ever seen, every voice you have ever heard has all been produced on that pale blue dot. All of our history, our culture, our philosophy and our achievements occurred on that pale blue dot.

Even that picture doesn't really put things in its proper perspective. Scientists have calculated the size of the known universe as approximately 13.9 billion light years. Yet it only takes a beam of light a little less than one and one-half hours to reach the point where that picture was taken. In the scheme of the larger

universe Voyager had barely moved, yet Earth was almost imperceptible. In the scale of larger universe, not only the Earth but also the entire solar system is smaller than a grain of sand on a beach. It puts me in mind of Psalm 8:4, "What is man that you take thought of him?" In cosmic perspective, our achievements seem awfully small.

Weakness is a part of the human condition. We think our achievements are impressive, but they pale in comparison to the size of the universe. We think we are strong, yet in comparison to other members of the animal kingdom we are not the strongest creatures; nor the largest, fastest, or most numerous. In fact our bodies have few natural defenses compared to the world around us. Only our intelligence separates us. We can live to be one hundred years old, but as we speak, a virus we can't even see is putting us at risk. If humanity were to cease to exist, few of our man-made objects would still be standing 1000 years from now.

In this passage, Paul points to another aspect of weakness. He points to our weakness in understanding and relating to God. Paul says that this understanding is so weak that we don't even know how to pray. We are utterly helpless; we propose nothing in the sight of God.

The thing is, though, Paul doesn't stop there. Paul goes on to tell us that the Spirit of God intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words- that He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. It's kind of awesome to ponder. We're just a little blue dot. From Saturn you can barely see it. Yet, the Spirit of God knows the hearts of every person on this pale blue dot.

But it gets even better. Paul tells us that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. He then goes on to explain what he means by this. It was common belief among first century Jews that the firstborn child enabled all other children from the same womb to be born. Paul uses this analogy to talk about how God works through us. Paul says that those whom God foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son so that He would be the firstborn among the brethren. We are destined to be conformed to Christ- not by our action, but by his. Those whom he predestined, He also called; and those whom he called, He also justified; and those whom He justified, He also glorified.

Paul says at the beginning. "What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us?" Then he sums things up saying, "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord"

In this great universe, we are not very impressive. By the standards of the universe, we are not very powerful. We understand much about the universe, but we have little control over it. We can't really go anywhere; we can't really defend ourselves against its greatest dangers; we may even cease to exist before we know what happens. But we have a protector. God loves us. The inhabitants of this little pale blue dot are under the care of the mightiest power in the entire universe- indeed we are under the protection of the creator of this universe.

Life can seem unbearable at times. I learned just this week that the son of a friend of mine has cancer. I found my friend reduced to tears, nearly unable to breathe. I have seen people face bankruptcy, job loss and family squabbles. At times even holding onto our faith is nearly impossible. We are weak. The good news is that isn't the end of the story. Even in our weakness, God loves us. God protects us. God knows our needs better than we do. God continues to love us and intercede for us even in our weakness. Even in our weakness.