

If you haven't been following the major league baseball playoffs, you may not have heard that the Royals are not in them this year. Again. But something happened already this year that I was happy to see. Neither of the wild card teams advanced beyond the first round. You see, baseball has 3 divisions in each of 2 leagues, but they need 8 teams to have playoffs, so they give a berth to the second-place team in each league with the best record. More than once that wild card team has advanced all the way to the World Series and even won it. It just doesn't seem right to me. A second place team has no business competing with first place teams at all, and it's unfair to first place teams to have to beat a team they have already beat during the regular season. But sometimes life is not fair. You can be very disciplined, practice hard, execute your skills, be recognized among your peers, and still fail to gain a prize that by all rights should be yours. Nonetheless, we teach kids and live with the expectation that if you follow the rules and keep your values in order, you will receive your reward.

So who can blame James and John, the sons of Zebedee, for expecting that advice to pay off in their lives? They had already forsaken all else to follow Christ. They did it as brothers. Jesus admitted them to the inner circle of disciples, together with Peter, taking them along for some of his most memorable experiences, such as the Transfiguration. They probably felt a little competitive with Peter and wanted to get Jesus to promote them when he entered his glory. They were following all the rules; they should get the right reward.

Jesus saw it differently. There were real rewards – some would sit in glory with him; he doesn't deny that. But he implies there are other rewards – the good feeling that comes from serving others, the self-respect you feel when you sacrifice for a greater good, and the approval of God for those who listen to Jesus and obey him. Unfortunately for James and John, none of those spiritual and emotional rewards guarantees material glory. What's more, the path to reward is strewn with strife. You will drink a cup of suffering; you will be baptized with challenging circumstances that call forth your best judgment. The path to material glory involves some suffering, but the only part of this experience that Jesus is willing to guarantee is the suffering – not the glory. Even if you do all the right things, even if you suffer as a result of them, you still may not experience the material glory that you believe is yours by right. If your reason for accepting suffering is to attain merely material benefit, you are setting yourself up for disappointment. But if you accept suffering because you know that somehow it benefits others, that it will strengthen your resolve in the face of adversity, and that it will make you a better person, you'll be OK. You won't even

need those material rewards because you will experience the inner peace that comes from following Christ.

Sometimes a second place team gets the prize you deserve. Sometimes you work hard and don't see the results. But we can always experience the presence of Christ when we serve others, and no reward is greater than that.