



It so happens to be the birthday of one of the greatest athletes of my generation. And it's only fitting that in a few weeks' time, the worldwide event will, yet again, ensue where his name became synonymous with...dominance. It all started back in 2000: this teenager, who would spend some of his training days at the University of the... State-Up-North (unfortunately for the Buckeye fans); he jumped into the pool for the first time in front of audience that spanned countries from thousands of miles away. He didn't pull anything off of notoriety then in Sydney, Australia. But that was all about to change four years later.

It was rather suitable that the next opportunity would take place where the first modern Olympiad was held just over a century before. And right before the eyes of billions of international viewers, one of the most enthralling athletic performances took off in butterfly and

freestyle and medley races. Six gold medals all told in Athens, Greece. Impressive enough, but the dominance only multiplied in Beijing, China, for the next rendition. A record eight golds, which still stands going into Paris, France, this summer. All told, after his career drew to a close in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, nearly a decade ago: 23 top finishes in swimming. The next closest in any sport whatsoever has nine.

However, part of the story is what happens in the middle of his supposedly unstoppable supremacy. The name of Michael Phelps would become synonymous with an issue that many in this country would rather not accept is a problem at all: those struggling with mental health. The greatest swimmer of all time did his best to keep it quiet, but it continued to fester: anxiety, depression, even thoughts of suicide. It led to two citations of driving under the influence. Those closest to him were understandably terrified of what could happen next.

Thankfully, the supposedly unflappable towering force in the pool, finally caved into asking for help. He spent time at an addiction treatment center in Arizona, where he was thoroughly scared at the thought of sharing his fears and worries with complete strangers. But soon enough, those days outside the pool saved his life. And yes, along the way, there was also help from Scripture and best-selling Christian literature, not to mention some faith-driven athletes, but also his mother and sisters and other friends who refused to give up hope for the man they loved before he turned into an aquatic phenom. Yes, joy did eventually come, even greater joy than standing on top of a medal podium in front of a worldwide audience.

However, it's only fitting that such a human story is remembered as we hear one of the most treasured verses in the Bible for many children of God: "Weeping spends the night, but joy comes in the morning." Because, for Michael Phelps, and for far too many other children of God, including those who are not the best swimmers or athletes or celebrities or whoever else of that social stratosphere; for far too many human beings at all, weeping spends more than a night. And we as the church must do our part to say to all people that that is okay. And it is more than okay to ask for help. And it is more than okay if the long sought-after joy does not automatically come the next morning.

We as the church must also do our part in ensuring that all people realize that God is not waiting for you at some perfect happiness feeling. We proclaim the God who is just as much with us at the joyous moments as God will be in the weeping ones. And if it takes more than a night, however long it takes to help you or absolutely anyone feel whole again, this God is going to stick it out with you no matter how long that journey takes, which is by far more important than 100 meters in a pool.

The church also recognizes that, yes, sometimes that journey includes a pastor or a Stephen Minister or another church member, but we also know that sometimes it requires a professional therapist or a trained counselor or a call or text to a hotline to ensure the recipient is kept anonymous. Whatever healthy way it takes, we will always do our part to ensure as many children of God are cared for in any way that it can be done in our outside church building walls. That we will do our part in ensuring the Gospel is proclaimed to all people regardless of worldly success or lack thereof: that no thoughts or emotions we experience will ever pull us away from God swimming or running or simply being right beside us through all terrains of life.

After all, God's joy over us does not wait around for the morning to come. God has had joy over us from the very beginning. It was further brought to life in Jesus Christ: to show that not even death stands a chance to stop that relentless joy. So, rest assured in God's promise that will never be broken: you are loved and always will be. Your life is worth living. Not only that, but you have a most precious light of Christ to share with the world, including with those who feel as if there is no hope at all for them; a life-altering light brighter than any medal, which will never ever be taken away from you. So, for that Greatest News of all, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!