

Hit by the Pitch

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As an assistant coach for my son's baseball team, I have watched a particularly formative event take place in the lives of many Little Leaguers. They come out to play with the greatest enthusiasm, but then something happens—something which even the most talented players are not always able to overcome. They are hit by the pitch.

Suddenly, enthusiasm for the game turns to fear. The dream about hitting the ninth-inning home run to win the seventh game of the World Series turns into a desire to take up lawn-bowling, ping-pong, or some other less-threatening form of athletic competition.



These youngsters may still stand in the batter's box with a determined *appearance*, gritting their teeth and wagging the bat as they wait. But behind the mask of self-confidence, they are thinking more about avoiding the potential pain than about concentrating on the pitch and making solid contact. The player dominated by fear will bail out before the pitch ever gets there, even if it is right down the middle. His left foot (if he is a right-handed batter) will step toward third base rather than toward the pitcher, moving his whole body away from the plate and making it unlikely that he will ever get a good hit. Ball players sometimes call this "stepping in the bucket," and it is a difficult habit to break.

Some players never overcome their fear. One Little Leaguer I coached was so fearful that he would jump completely out of the batter's box every time the ball was pitched. Another asked if he could play in the field, but not bat.

Those who go on to be effective baseball players in high-school, college, or the professional ranks learn that while getting hit by the pitch is not pleasant, it is part of the game. *All* serious baseball players get hit by the pitch sooner or later. Some get hit a lot! Former Major Leaguer Hughie Jennings holds the all-time record: he was hit by the pitch 287 times during his career! Ouch! The record-holder among current players is Craig Biggio who has been hit 273 times. Fifty-six Major Leaguers have been hit 100 or more times. And these are no 40 mile-per-hour Little League pitches, but bullets coming in at them 80-100 miles-per-hour!

Just as getting hit by the pitch is an *unpleasant* but *ordinary* part of playing baseball, there is an *unpleasant* but *ordinary* part of being a Christian. I am speaking of the experience of being misunderstood, rejected, ridiculed, or

even physically persecuted because of the gospel. The difficulties related to speaking and living the truth don't usually affect professing Christians who prefer "sitting on the bench"—those who are more like spectators than active participants. They happen to those who boldly engage the world by unashamedly presenting and defending the biblical message (see Rom. 1:16)—those who live lives that honor Christ and therefore expose the unholiness of those around them (see Eph. 5:7-11). Because they stay in the box, they often suffer for it.

The Apostle Paul probably holds the record for getting "hit by the pitch" most often. He was whipped five times, beaten with rods three times, and stoned once. Add to this, as Paul said of his own experience, "danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure" (2 Cor. 11:24-27). In another place he described himself and the other apostles as fools for Christ's sake, weak, dishonored, hungry and thirsty, poorly dressed, buffeted, homeless, persecuted, and slandered. He concluded by saying, "We have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things" (1 Cor. 4:10-13).

Please don't misunderstand; Paul was not immune to the temptation to "step in the bucket." Admitting his personal weakness, he asked the Christians in Ephesus to pray for him so that he would speak boldly as he ought to speak (Eph. 6:20). By the grace of God, he did not allow his weakness to paralyze him. He refused to live the "safe" Christian life because such a life is purchased at the price of silence or compromise.

How about you? Are you willing to be hit by the pitch? Or do you prefer to play in the field, but not bat? An old hymn by Isaac Watts contains the introspective questions every professing Christian should ask:

Am I a soldier of the cross, a follower of the Lamb,
And shall I fear to own His cause, or blush to speak His name?
Must I be carried to the skies on flowery beds of ease,
While others fought to win the prize, and sailed through bloody seas?

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