

The Game of Life: When We Lose the Game
Psalm 132:1-5

Last week, I expressed appreciation to our non-sports fans for being patient with the rest of us while we take this look at the Psalms through the lens of athletics. This morning, I would also like to thank those of you who have been so gracious in affirming this approach to the Psalms. In fact, I'm convinced some of you would really be okay with it if we JUST talked about sports!

Now, I have to admit, having been a participant in the past and being a fan now, I've really enjoyed looking for the connections each week between the scriptures and athletics. Sometimes these competitions give us a thrill—the thrill of victory! At other times, they break our hearts—the agony of defeat! But hopefully, we're always learning something either way.

Last week, Pam and I were out walking, and we happened to be within earshot of a coach working with a group of young boys. He was trying to turn these little nine and ten year olds into a football team. Now, this was something akin to herding cats, but he was obviously taking his task very seriously.

Having been coached personally and having attempted to do a bit of it in the past, I was interested in what the coach was telling his young charges, especially after I heard him say this: "Men," he yelled--using a tone that in any other setting we would call "verbal abuse"—but not here--he's their football coach!

"Men, football is played North and South, not East and West!" That's what he said. Now, I couldn't help but notice that while the eyes of these young players were focused on their coach, there was a bit of glancing from side to side at this point as if asking the kid beside them, "Do you know what that means?"

But, hey, we've all heard sports commentators say that kind of thing, so the kids ought to understand, right? Well, to his credit, a lot of the other things the coach said actually did make sense; and before we finished our walk, he was getting those young players to do some pretty impressive stuff.

One thing was clear, though. Whenever those young boys lined up against some other kids to actually play their version of football, the competition wouldn't just be about nurturing their love for the game. He intended for his team to WIN!

Maybe they will win; but sometimes, in “the game of life,” we don’t. The game doesn’t always go our way. This is what we’ve been talking about for these four Sundays. Sometimes, in fact, we don’t even get picked; and we feel left out and lonely.

When we do get in the game, we may “drop the ball”—we all do at times. So we talked about the need to BE forgiven—as well as our need to forgive others.

Life also has a way of putting us in pressure packed situations. The demands can seem overwhelming. Last week, in Psalm 56, we found David in very threatening circumstances. He couldn’t rely on himself nor his sling. Only his faith in God gave him courage and confidence and enabled him to cope with the pressure. Sometimes, this is how life is for us.

Now, all of this brings us to our Scripture and topic for today—and, yes, it’s about another one of those disappointing times in the game of life: *When We Lose the Game*—you know, like

_____ did yesterday!
Sorry about that—but that’s just football. The effects are far more profound when we lose in life.

And doesn’t it seem in recent months, the losses just keep on mounting up: losses in jobs and retirement funds and the losses of people’s lives in far-away places like Afghanistan—a lot of lost hope that we’ll be able to deal with some of the really big challenges facing our nation—challenges that are growing increasingly tough to manage the longer we wait.

In the game of life, there are times when we give our very best, but still lose. There are other times, though, when we lose because we keep “shooting ourselves in the foot.” We’re left with lots of regrets, knowing what could have been.

But life moves on—we don’t get “do-overs.” We can get forgiveness, but we still must often live with the consequences.

In Psalm 132, our text for today, we are reminded of a time in David’s life when he had to deal with a painful loss. He has to let go of his dream, which is a hard thing for any of us to do. Let’s look at the first five verses of this Psalm, and then we’ll try to learn something that might help us “when we lose the game.”

Psalm 132:1-5

¹ O LORD, remember David and all the hardships he endured. ² He swore an oath to the LORD and made a vow to the Mighty One of Jacob: ³ "I will not enter my house or go to my bed ⁴ I will allow no sleep to my eyes, no slumber to my eyelids, ⁵ till I find a place for the LORD, a dwelling for the Mighty One of Jacob."

Now, we're not told the whole story here. What this Psalm is referring to, though, became a moment of major defeat and disappointment in David's life. All we're told about here is the dream, but it's a dream that never became a reality for David.

He had a dream—the wide-awake kind of dream. In fact David pledges that he won't go to bed, he will not sleep—until he finds a dwelling place for the Lord. What's this about?

Well, it's about the Temple--the Jerusalem Temple. David had it in his head and heart to build a Temple for the Lord in Jerusalem. You know how that is, when you're really excited about something.

There are lots of athletes that find it hard to sleep the night before a big game. They're either fantasizing about how great they will be out on the field, or worrying that they won't be able to measure up. Either way, they can't sleep!

Evidently David is also staying up at night desiring, planning, envisioning this Temple. To build it would be the greatest accomplishment of his life. He really wants this!

You know the feeling. It can be on the athletic field for some or in the classroom for others. It may be focused on a certain person that you're convinced should be your special someone—whether or not the other person agrees. Or it may be a young couple dreaming of that little one they want so much to bring into the world together. I'm talking about big dreams!

Of course, these are all dreams that usually relate to the game of life's first half. There's a whole different set of dreams that happen in the second half of life. And friends, with all these aspirations, you can be sure that we will win some, and we will lose some too.

This is true in everybody's life. Even those who seem to always win could tell you about some very tough losses if you asked and they were willing to be honest—because nobody wins all the time!

David was known as a winner. He was a national hero for the Hebrews. Oh, he was guilty of some big-time failures, but, hey—his indiscretions never got him impeached! He was still the king!

David did at least seem to realize how blessed he was. He spoke of the Lord as being his shepherd all through his life, and as a gracious, sustaining host even when his enemies were near by. He felt so cared for that he was confident that not even “the valley of the shadow of death” would bring his life to an end: “for I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever,” he said.

David knew he was blessed, and he really wanted to build this Temple for the Lord. He was focused; he was ready to do whatever it took to see this project through to completion.

Legendary coach Bear Bryant—yes, I know I mentioned him last week—but this is a good quote. He said, “I make my practices real hard because if a player is a quitter, I want him to quit in practice, not in a game!”

Charlie Brown, on the other hand, was never a very effective coach—or I should say “manager,” since baseball was his game. Well, one day in the funny papers, Lucy, after missing yet another fly ball, says to poor Charlie Brown: “Sorry I missed that easy fly ball, manager. I thought I had it; but suddenly I remembered all the others I’ve missed, and the past got in my eyes.”

Well, David was certainly no quitter; and his past had been filled mainly with victories. But as David’s life drew to a close, he realized his greatest goal would not be realized. He would not be the one to build the Temple. Instead, this high honor would go to his son, Solomon.

A couple of Scripture passages will help us to piece this story together. In I Chronicles 17, we read: ³ That night the word of God came to Nathan, saying: ⁴ “Go and tell my servant David, ‘This is what the LORD says: You are not the one to build me a house to dwell in.

Later, in chapter 28 of I Chronicles, we find this explanation: ² King David rose to his feet and said: “Listen to me, my brothers and my people. I had it in my heart to build a house as a place of rest for the ark of the covenant of the LORD, for the footstool of our God, and I made plans to build it. ³ But God said to me, ‘You are not to build a house for my Name, because you are a warrior and have shed blood.’

Game over. David, who had always been such a winner, had to deal with a very painful loss—just as most of US have or someday will. So, how do we react to losing? Are we good losers, or not?

Knute Rockne, the legendary coach at Notre Dame, said, “Show me a good and gracious loser, and I’ll show you a failure.” Well, perhaps that’s true in football—he knew the game a lot better than I do. But that’s one saying that I don’t think carries over well into the game of life.

Gabriel Marcel wrote a book called Being and Having in which he argues that it is unfortunate that our society teaches us how to take possession of things—and does this quite well—when, instead, it should initiate us in the art of “letting go.”

We’re not good at letting go. We don’t handle disappointment well. Frustrations mount as we find ourselves clinging to “what might have been.” Yet we live in a world where losses occur every day. Sometimes we lose, and we must deal with defeat.

So what can we learn from David about handling the inevitable defeats that come our way? Well, we don’t have time to turn to all the Scripture passages related to this—but it’s all there in I Chronicles if you care to look it up. For now, I’ll just try to summarize for you what David did.

When it became clear to him that he would not be the one to build the Temple, David accepted it. It was a terribly disappointing defeat, but he responded by redirecting his energies.

Rather than dwelling on what had been denied him, blaming God or others, growing bitter or despondent, David made peace with God’s will. It’s like he prayed the prayer Jesus would pray centuries later, “Not my will, but Thy will be done.”

Know what David did next? He developed a new plan that meshed with his new circumstances. He set about to make the task of building the Temple as easy as possible for his son, Solomon. He assembled expert workers. He gathered materials. He even laid the foundation for the Temple. David willingly sacrificed his plan for God’s plan.

To me, this feels something like the quarterback who’s a senior and will soon be graduating, so he starts giving his back-up some more playing time. It’s become obvious the team won’t be making the play-offs this year, so he’s paving the way for next year. The younger player gets in the game more often as the season draws to a close. And everybody tries to pass the dream of a great season next year on to him.

This is sort of like what David did for Solomon. David had accomplished so much, but this great leader could also let go of his dreams and ambitions, overcome his disappointments and defeats, and be an encourager and enabler for his son. Success doesn't always look the way we think it should.

Whenever we allow our will to be brought in line with God's will for us, when we submit to God's perfect plan rather than clinging to our own failed plans, we are demonstrating faith, like David, and we are well on our way to a successful life.

You see, God wants us to win. I believe this is His goal for all of us. Through the gift of His Son, He makes victory possible. Jesus makes it clear to us that even if nobody else picks us, He does.

And though everyone else may turn away from us when we drop the ball, He won't. And when life is most stressful, and we feel that all is lost, we can still depend on this loving, gracious Savior to see us through the very darkest valleys we'll ever face.

This is why the apostle Paul, with all the hardships, failures and disappointments he experienced in his life, was still able to say, "We are more than conquerors through Him that loved us!"

If our lives are in Christ Jesus, if we know Him as Lord of all, no matter how many defeats we suffer, we'll still win. At the game of life—life now, and life eternal—we win. Thanks be to God!