

# Winners and Losers

“Faith surpasses disappointment.”

Philippians 3:7-9

Rev. John H. Hice

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First United Methodist Church of Royal Oak, Michigan

## Let Down

We had a budding soccer star in the family. There were so many Saturday mornings in early spring when we stood out in 45° d rizzle along the sidelines cheering our little guy on. At first it was grass stained shorts caused by kicks that lifted his whole body in the air, landing him square on the seat of his pants; and his infamous slide kicks, when he'd go running toward a crowd of players bunched around the ball and do a baseball slide into them to wedge the ball free. These were illegal, but he rarely got carded.

He grew up with the game and got to be known as Speedy because no one playing middle field was as fast as him. He'd run from one end of the field to the other in a flash whether he had the ball or not. One day we were talking in the car when he started to say something he said, “Dad, someday when *soccer* becomes the National Pastime...” I said, “What?!” and stared at him with my *there's no crying in baseball* eyes. That ended the conversation. But it belied his passion for the sport.

He and his friends were a team from the time we moved to Grand Rapids. They were so good that in his Jr. High coach started scheduling select teams for them to compete against. He was good. No one could beat his sophomore JV team. Then he was about to enter his junior year of high school when he and all his friends were required to try out for the varsity team. There would still be some seniors on the team who were great athletes and it was clear that the old team would somehow be broken up. He practiced with his friends all summer. He lasted through several days of try-outs when some of his friends were cut. Then, toward the end of the week he came home a little early.

“They said I was pretty good; but I just wasn't aggressive enough on the net,” he said. He'd been cut.

His soccer career was over.

And I think it might have broken his heart.

You do get your hopes up, though, don't you? And when it falls short of expectations, then what? Tigers look good this year, almost fooling us into forgetting what happened last season when they rode high in first place almost all summer and fall only to flop at the end. You thought you'd get that promotion but it went to someone else with less seniority. Then they cut your job. A loyal employee trusts the system only to find that the company in its trouble drained his pension fund leaving him with nothing. A pastor disappears with thousands of dollars of church funds. A trip is ruined by days of unending rain. Two people plan their lives together but one leaves the other sometime soon before the wedding.

Life doesn't always go according to the script you write. So, what do you do and who do you blame? It's tough when you get disappointed by circumstances. 'Tougher still when it feels like you've been disappointed by God. 'Perhaps toughest of all when you think you've disappointed yourself.

### **Higher Calling**

Paul of the early church was disappointed.

He had spent his life studying and devoting himself to the Law of Moses – so much so that he considered himself blameless, perfect in regard to obeying it. He says that he was at the head of his class, a stellar student among the young rabbis.<sup>1</sup>

He bet his life on this path he took.

Everything he stood for, everything he was: was bound up in the brand of Judaism that was strict and scriptural. He lived like he believed: God's judgment would be harsh; your only hope was to live up to every expectation.

Then he went to extremes to root out anything and anybody who questioned his brand of the truth: so he attacked the Christian movement, leading persecutions against it and consenting to mob executions of its leaders.<sup>2</sup> Highly acclaimed for his work, Paul enjoyed the privileges that went with being a religious model and scholar of his day.

Then Paul discovered all that was good for. Nothing.

*For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish...*

Status, respect, authority: all this is gone because Paul threw himself over to the Christians. Bible scholar Morna Hooker suggests that Paul may be saying that he was actually stripped of his privileges by his colleagues who now disown him. Everything for which he worked until his journey to Damascus – *everything* is taken away.

You might say, “Well, what does he expect?” Or you might ask, “How does he go on?”

The first thing that Paul does is name it. He looks at what once was and recognizes it for what it is: a loss. He once had something that seemed good to have, and now it is taken away.

This is the first thing to do. Disappointment happens when you lose something. It's a death of something for which you have to grieve. That is, you need to say goodbye to it before you can go on with your life.<sup>3</sup> If that brings sadness, then be sad. If it generates anger, be angry, but just don't sin.

Grieving takes time and follows through a progression of stages, even if the loss is not of someone you love. It starts with shock and disbelief, it continues through a time of bargaining and grasping trying to get it back, it's typical to move on to anger; and if you press on you can get to the point where you can get on with your life without it.

C.S. Lewis said, “Crying is all right in its way while it lasts. But you have to stop sooner or later, and then you still have to decide what to do.”<sup>4</sup>

Decide: that's finally what you need to do. James needed to decide what he needed to do once there was no soccer. He had to look beyond his disappointment to see life on the other side before he could move ahead.

He had to see that the only thing that's the end of the world is the end of the world.

What Paul decides is probably the most helpful example of all. He says, “For (Christ's) sake...I consider all that I lost as rubbish.” In comparison with the gain he's had in a faith that connects him with Jesus, the things he lost aren't even fit to be touched.

This is what you might call *the unique Christian approach to facing loss*. Paul doesn't just accept the bumps and go on stoically, poorer-but-wiser. Nor does he pretend that it doesn't matter. Instead he changes his priorities and his expectations. He's saying, even in the midst of sadness and disappointment, hang onto the relationship. Keep Christ first. Then you always come out ahead.

Jesus told a parable about a man who found a treasure in a field that was such a find that he sold everything he had in order to buy the field and have the treasure. Paul told how Jesus lived that out in his own life by counting even equality with God as something not to hang onto but rather emptied himself in obedience and lived as a servant in every way, even to the point of giving up life itself by going to the cross. Then Paul said – have that same kind of attitude.<sup>5</sup>

So what Paul lost and how he deals with it comes as his own personal illustration of putting that attitude to work. He's saying there is one goal, one expectation that overshadows everything else. It's not as though other things don't matter. It's not as though they don't count or you don't hurt when you lose them.

But you need to keep your priorities straight.

No matter what the disappointment – even the crushing ones like the loss of a job or a marriage that falls apart – no matter what the disappointment, you can always count on God who promises you the power of the resurrection.

*Paul says, "Hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us."*

### **Moving On**

James had a broken heart. Up to that late summer day before his junior year he was soccer. Then it was gone.

And I wanted to cry for him.

But what I didn't know is that James had been thinking through those summer months. He had a realistic picture of the possibility that his soccer career might come to an end, even as good as he was. So during those months, he pictured what life might look like if he were cut from the team.

He came up with a Plan B.

He decided that if he didn't have soccer he would use his speed by running on the cross country team. The day after he lost soccer he went to the running coach who put him on the team right away (there were no tryouts and no limits for the number that could be on the team).

And as it turned out, Speedy was one of the fastest runners in the school. There was life after soccer. There was another place where he could use his gift.

Can it be: there is always a *Plan B*? The power of the Living Christ gives you the option of confronting all of life that way.

When you ask God to show you new opportunities, and you keep the eyes of your heart focused, then who knows?...

What seems to be loss may be the way to new gain. And whether or not that's the way it works out, the promise of the resurrected Lord is to lift you up, heal you, and give you new life.

It is not the end of the world.

Ever.

As long as you stay on that track, you see: the victory is always yours. Take on the attitude, and that's what you can expect.

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<sup>1</sup> Galatians 1:14.

<sup>2</sup> Acts 7:1-8:1; 9:1-14.

<sup>3</sup> Princeton WordNet Search 2.1.

<http://wordnet.princeton.edu/perl/webwn?o2=&o6=&o1=1&o5=&o4=o3=&s=disappointment>

<sup>4</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Silver Chair*, New York: Harper Collins Publishers. © 1951, 1983.

<sup>5</sup> Philippians 2:5-11.