

WHEN LOSING IS WINNING
Psalm 51

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CLARIFYING

This time of year, we've just passed the season of the "fired basketball coach." The crowd is fickle, you know. There have been over 5 changes this year in men's basketball coaching positions and 30 changes in women's basketball positions. The bottom line is when two teams tip off, there are no ties. The overall equation demands there are going to be some losing teams and, therefore, some losing coaches. Everybody can't win. It's an impossibility.

But we're trained, we're reared to be winners. But winners don't always learn. Sometimes there are some real benefits in losing.

I found the longest losing streaks. A losing streak is defined as an uninterrupted string of contests (whether games or matches) lost by a team.

In Division I football, the Northwestern Wildcats lost 34 games. The losing streak lasted from 1979 to 1982. They also lost nine bowl games in a row.

I found another NCAA football team that lost 80 games in a row. The Prairie View A&M Panthers lost 80 games in a row from 1989 to 1998. Nearly a decade of defeat without a single victory.

In women's basketball, the Long Island Blackbirds are most notable for their losing – 58 games in a row from 1986 to 1989. Didn't win a game for three years.

You get the point. While there are some teams that go on long winning streaks, there are also teams that go on very long losing streaks.

In our culture, we've even got a symbol [make symbol L with your fingers] to call somebody a loser. To be a loser is tantamount to being a nobody in our culture. We live in a culture that loves winners.

The late pastor Frank Pollard talked about reunions at his old alma mater. "All the guys were winners. One was a Heisman Trophy winner, and he's been winning ever since. Another was an All-American in baseball. He played in a World Series and made Rookie of the Year. He's there. Another was an All-American football player. One is the president of a giant utility company. Others are millionaires in the real estate business. Those guys are winners."

But to be completely honest, Pollard had to say, every time he gets together with them, he's disappointed. "There's no depth to the company. It's just one-upmanship. 'Man, let me

show you how I'm a bigger winner than you are.' 'Let me show you how I've come through, made it big.'" He said you get the feeling they have disdain for people who are not winners. There's something just not comfortable or soul-soothing about the fellowship you have with that group of winners.

We come to the depth of David in this psalm. He's not a winner. Oh, he had been a winner. He'd defeated Goliath. He'd become a national hero overnight. He was the finest military man in the land. He walked down the streets and they gave him parades and accolades. They sang "Saul has killed his thousands, but David has killed his ten thousands." Even as a little red-headed lad, he'd been anointed as king. He had known what it is to win and win and win and be in the most powerful of positions.

And all of a sudden, he loses.

Tradition ascribes this psalm to David in the context of his sin with Bathsheba. He'd really become guilty of a whole chain of vices, had he not? Lust led to adultery. Adultery led to deception. Deception led to murder. In trying to cover his tracks, he only dug the pit deeper. Finally, the Lord confronted him through Nathan the prophet – the ringing words, "You are the man." David was brought on his knees before God. Judgment followed swiftly.

Here we come to Psalm 51 – David's deep, prayerful, agonizing response to his loss, to his catastrophe.

Look at Psalm 51.

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your lovingkindness;
According to the greatness of Thy compassion blot out my transgressions.
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
And cleanse me from my sin.
For I know my transgressions,
And my sin is ever before me.
Against Thee, and Thee only, have I sinned,
And done what is evil in Thy sight.

Verse 7

Purify me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

Verse 8

... Let the bones which Thou hast broken rejoice.

Verse 9

Hide Thy face from my sins,
And blot out all my iniquities.

Verse 10

... Renew a steadfast spirit within me.

Verse 14

Deliver me from bloodguiltiness...

Do you think those words were written by someone who always won, by someone who never suffered a loss? No, winners don't have the benefit of the depth of life that this brokenness brought about in the heart of the king.

I've never believed in celebrity religion. We see a lot of it – parades of athletic stars and beauty queens across the platforms and pulpits in America in order to impress everybody that this winner in life has teamed up with God. Sure he believes in God – look at what God has done for him. Just what the devil said of Job, isn't it? I think what people really want to know is if we – you and me – when we get crushed, when we fall down, when we don't make the number one lineup, when we don't get to be a millionaire, when we don't do all those things – we are still confident in our faith toward God. In fact, I've discovered in life that those who suffer and those who lose sometimes – no, most of the time – are bearers of the greatest faith.

Let's look at the benefits of losing.

When we lose, it simplifies and clarifies life.

When we find ourselves in a state of health, wealth and prosperity, when we find ourselves always the winner, we're like a horse running on the track with blinders. We can't see to the left, and we can't see to the right. We're totally unaware of the reality around us.

Has Covid created clarity for you?

But you let a challenging sickness sift us, you let a financial hardship strike, you let marital bliss become a blunder – we find ourselves shaken down to our very foundation in life. It's simplified and clarified. I'm not wishing it on you, and I'm not wishing it on me, but there are some real benefits to losing.

The high school buddy who never did take God seriously until trouble hit. Bagging a football scholarship to a Big 10 university consumed all his attention. But in his sophomore year at Michigan he got slammed on the five yard line. Two surgeries and three sideline seasons later he'd done some serious thinking. Life was short. Where were his priorities? Today, he's still in sports. He coaches the Tiny Tornadoes after work. But his priorities are straighter. Bible study and prayer get their chunk of time in his schedule. (Joni Erickson Tada, *When God Weeps*, p. 21)

Yes, sometimes we know God better through suffering.

It's a curiosity. But there is a couple down the street who tend to be just a bit materialistic. Then, last year when he lost his job, they prayed harder, got by with less, and learned some lessons. They found that family means more than possessions, that community college wasn't

so bad for their Princeton-bound daughter. God took care of them while they climbed back to their feet.

Sometimes we discover God's hand in heartbreak. It's another peculiarity. There is the 26-year-old man whose girlfriend returns the engagement ring. He lets it sit on his dresser for months as a memento to his failed love life. He dealt with the grief by pouring himself into a troubled kid who lived two doors down and who had never known a father. He took him to the stables on weekends and taught him to ride horseback. It made the spurned man grow up. He learned his own problems were super-small. (Joni Erickson Tada, *When God Weeps*)

You show me someone who's facing a tragedy, and I'll show you someone who has learned to prioritize. Things that once seemed so important now seem absolutely trivial. People that we let rob us of our joy, people that we gave so much power over our lives – now they seem absolutely powerless. They don't matter. We have a new set of priorities. One of the benefits of losing is that it simplifies and clarifies life.

PURIFYING

That's what happens to David here, isn't it? When you have victory after victory in life, you begin to think somehow you're doing it on your own – God is not necessary. You're self-sufficient. You don't realize how fragile, frail, and weak you really are. You begin to think you're something really special. You don't really have to lean on God all that much. Then, when the loss comes – and friend, it will come – it helps to purify.

David was king. David was wealthy. David was a warrior. David cries out, "O God, have mercy upon me according to your lovingkindness. Cleanse me from my iniquity. Forgive me of my sin. I acknowledge my sin. My sin is ever before me. Wash me and I will be clean. Forgive me and I will be right. Cleanse me with hyssop."

He is saying, "I need to be purified."

Losses sometimes are a real purifier for us. They put us together.

Look at verses 3 and 4.

I know my transgressions,
And my sin is always before me.
Against you, and you only, have I sinned,
And done this evil in your sight,
That you may be found just when you speak,
And blameless when you judge.

David, because he is a loser here, sees the reality of sin. Sometimes when we lose, it's purifying.

We have a tendency to blame everyone and everything but ourselves. But finally we have to join the psalmist and say, "I sinned. I did it." It's the first step to healing and recovery. His consciousness now is dominated by his guilt – "And my sin is always before me." Yes, sometimes one of the benefits of losing is that we're purified.

Look at verse 7.
Purify me.

Look at verse 10.
Create in my a clean heart, O God,
And renew a steadfast spirit within me.

You go to the winners' circle – you get around a lot of winners – and you'll find there is no unity, no real unity in a circle of winners. In the circle of winners, there is the game of one-upmanship. Everybody is "in-turned." There is not any real relationship and unity there.

You know where the unity is? The unity is in the circle of those who are losing. If each one of us this morning were to come here and tell about our failures, our falters, to share the burdens on our heart – if we would begin to share those burdens and failures with each other, pretty soon we'd be feeling a unity like never before, identifying with each other, loving each other, praying for each other, understanding each other – together in the circle of union. That really takes place not in the circle of winners but in the circle of losers.

We need to be careful about success, about winning. Look at the experience of David in the psalms. We learn we need to watch out for our victories. They take off our spiritual edge. Winning can take so very, very much away from us if we're not careful.

RENEWING

Losing can bring us to renewal (v. 10).

How we long for renewal. Every area of our life is so easily corroded and stained. Our marriages need renewal. As Scott Peck observes, we must fall in love again and again. Our families need renewal. Our churches need renewal when things become mechanical. And most of all, we need personal renewal – a deep inner conviction about our own sin and poverty, followed by a fresh cleansing and infilling with God's Spirit.

You know what we see in this psalm, what we hear today in the message? There is no renewal apart from pain. Pain may come in moral places, like it did with David. It may come when life is broken, interrupted by illness, by economic reversal, by an upheaval in relationships. It may come when we reflect upon the pace with which life passes and upon our haunting need for meaning. Carl Jung said all of the people over forty years old who were coming to see him for psychiatric help were looking for some reason to continue to live.

We need renewal when we're exhausted, when we're uninvolved, when we're in hopeless despair, when it seems as if there is nowhere to turn and no way out. When we're doomed and trapped and at the end of the rope – we need renewal.

One of the benefits of being broken is that it allows God to use us.

Have you noticed the common thread in God's choice of servants – the thread of brokenness? The thread of losing? Throughout the life of Jacob, the heel-grabber, the one who was always the winner over Esau his brother – God couldn't use him. God couldn't use him until he was a broken man, until he was fearful for his life from Esau. Esau now had the upper hand and the possibility of revenge. It was then when Jacob cried out, "Deliver me, I pray, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau. I fear him, lest he come and attack me and the mothers with the children." It's not until he's broken, until he finally loses the game of one-upmanship with Esau and has to bow down to Esau seven times as Esau approaches – it's then that God can use him.

How about Joseph? So arrogant, strutting around in his coat of many colors, dreaming dreams of his brothers bowing down and even his father and mother. God can't use Joseph in his arrogance, prancing like a peacock. God can use Joseph when he finds himself in the darkness of the dungeon – when however innocent he was, he was broken. Then God could use him.

God can't use Moses as long as he is a winner, as long as he's in Pharaoh's court. Rather, God was able to use him after he was a broken man – stuttering and stammering before the Burning Bush, not as a member of Egypt's royal family but, rather, as a stammering, stuttering shepherd on the run in the desert.

You remember who God chooses to replace Moses? It's Joshua – Joshua who's fearful and Joshua who's dismayed. A Joshua who's broken and needs God to say to him, "Be courageous. Don't tremble. I'll be with you wherever you go."

You see the thread? You see who God uses? It's the losers. God can't use Samson as long as he is the most eligible bachelor in Palestine, chasing women over the Timnah hillside. God uses him when he is blind and broken and he finds himself, like a beast of burden, turning the millstone for the Philistines, for the people who worship Dagon. The Philistines are shouting, "Our god has given Samson, our enemy, into our hands."

What's true of the Old Testament servants is true of the New Testament servants as well. God can't use an arrogant apostle, Peter, who, because his overestimation of his own abilities says he will never deny the Lord, even if he has to die. God can't use the Apostle Peter until he is broken, until three times he has denied any relationship with Jesus as the Christ, until he weeps bitterly, as Luke's gospel recalls. Only then can God use Peter to be the leader of the apostles, the spokesman for the early church.

God can't use a self-righteous apostle – Paul – as long as he is the Pharisee of Pharisees, self-righteous by his own account, blameless before the law as he would claim. God can't use him when he's marching to Damascus to arrest the people who are following God. In his own self-sufficiency he is diametrically opposed to the ways of God. It's a blind Apostle Paul who has seen the risen Christ on the road to Damascus – a humbled, fasting apostle, one who has to be not the aggressor but, rather, the retreator as he's lowered in a basket from the wall. Only then can God use the Apostle Paul.

There is a pastor who once said he had one requirement for all the new members of his staff. They had to be broken. There had to be something in their life that had shattered them so they could

walk closer to God because of their losing. Given the resumes of the choice servants of God in Scripture, he's right on target.

Sometimes it's when we lose our health and lose our wealth and lose our pride – as David did, humbled before a nation, humbled before the prophet of God – that we really receive the benefits. You know, it's Jesus, when he went down, down, down as Philippians 2 tells us – Jesus left heaven. Jesus left the throne at the right hand of His Father. Jesus humbled Himself and became a servant and was found in likeness as a man. In the likeness of a man, He emptied Himself. Jesus died on the cross for us. Down, down, down -- every one of those was a demotion. And it was by descending the ladder of greatness that Jesus was able to save us.

Maybe today, when we look in the newspaper to see who won, maybe we ought to look and see who lost. There are a lot of benefits in losing.