

The Light of the World

Wayne Eberly
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Ladies and Gentlemen, this is the day we have all been waiting for. Today is the long expected debut of Jesus, the up and coming star football player from Nazareth. The word on the street is that even though we have seen some stars before, this young man Jesus is the Messiah, the Savior, the Anointed One. Jacob was an outstanding lineman who could get down in the trenches and wrestle the fastest running back to the ground. Joseph was a visionary who could devise the most convoluted plays and still manage to go from slavery and imprisonment to the end zone in Egypt. Moses could make a hole big enough for an army to walk through. David was a sling shot hot shot that beat phenomenal odds in taking down the Giant. But no one has ever entered the stadium with such high hopes as Jesus of Nazareth. Listen to the roar of the crowd as God himself announces over the loudspeaker, “And now taking the field is my beloved Son. With him I am well pleased.”

As the crowd erupts in cheers of hope, Jesus takes the ball and on the first play runs right into trouble. The devil meets him with one temptation after another, trying to get him tackled and tangled up in offers of bread-making, kingdom taking, and laws of gravity breaking feats of prowess. But Jesus sidesteps old Satan and sees an open lane to the goal line. He races through Nazareth and proclaims the year of the Lord’s favor, and even when the crowd turns hostile he breaks away and crosses the goal line. Touchdown. This Jesus is the real deal. He can do it all.

As the game wears on he does it all. I mean, he literally does it all, both on the field and off. On the sideline there is a man lame from birth. Between plays Jesus heals him. The blind man? Same. The leper? Same. One fan is just going berserk, shouting, screaming, frothing at the mouth. Is this just another little league parent, a fan who has taken a ride on the silver bullet one too many times and is now in a drunken stupor? No. Turns out a demon has control of him. Jesus races over and sets him free. During a timeout a sinful woman washes his feet with her tears and anoints him with costly oil. Jesus makes full use of the timeout to offer her forgiveness and new life. At half time, he even opens the concession stand and there are free fish and loaves of bread for all. No beer is sold on game day, but watch out for the bottles of water, he’s even been known to turn those into a fine Merlot.

Halftime ends and we get back to the game. He recruits a squad of 12 to play on his team. They bring some great nicknames to the squad like James and John the Sons of Thunder and the Simon Peter, The Rock. But not everyone is on his side. The referees have it in for him. They keep calling penalties to try to halt his forward progress.

- Healing on the Sabbath: 5 yards
- Picking grain on the Sabbath: 5 yards
- Unsportsmanlike conduct for hanging out with tax-collectors and sinners: 5 yards
- Not fasting or washing your hands in just the right way: 5 yards
- And then the big one: Calling yourself the Son of God. Flags fly everywhere, and Jesus is given a 15 yard penalty, although it turns out folks would like to punish him even more severely.

Yet try as they might, they can't seem to stop Jesus. He strikes pay dirt with the Good Samaritan. He goes off-tackle with the mustard seed. He gets a first down by walking on the water. He goes deep when he calms the storm. And when he pulls the Prodigal Son out of his bag of tricks, the crowd erupts in cheers. They do the wave. As if, as if every single one of the onlookers knows exactly how it feels to be lost, to be lonely, to be far from home.

Even as the crowd cheers and roars with approval, something strange and ominous begins to take place. The team of disciples is huddled around Jesus, but Jesus starts to look up from the huddle and stare at the end zone, the end zone marked Jerusalem. He looks at it with a steely determination, his face as hard as flint. In the huddle, he begins diagramming a play that none of the disciples understand, or can even make sense of. It goes something like this: Jesus says, "I am going to race to the end zone, to Jerusalem, but when I get to the end zone, instead of victory and celebration, I am going to be rejected and put to death." Jesus called the play, "The Cross."

Peter heard that play and he signaled for time out and proceeded to scold Jesus, "Never ever suggest that play again." Jesus called it a second time, but still the disciples would not run the play. They were filled with grief. The third time, the disciples not only ignored it, but two of them, James and John, called an audible. Instead of Jesus going to the cross, how about the two of them, the Sons of Thunder, getting to sit on thrones, one on the right and one on the left of Jesus in a great victory celebration. No, it was pretty clear the disciples wanted nothing to do with any play that involved suffering and the cross. They wanted victory and they wanted glory.

For so long it looked like that was exactly how things would turn out. Late in the game Jesus made it to Jerusalem. The crowd streamed to the sidelines and raised their banners high as he rode triumphantly into town. They shouted Hosanna! They cried out, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." One side of the stadium took up the chant, "We love Jesus, yes we do, we love Jesus how 'bout you?" The response raised the rafters. Everybody loves a winner, and this bandwagon was bursting with believers.

But just as he came to the goal line, just as he was about to claim the prize, just as the disciples were getting their fingers sized for their Super Bowl ring, things went south. The referees hammered Jesus with so many penalties the crowd began to waver. They turned one of the disciples into a spy and a betrayer and he sold the opposition the play book. Jesus went to pray in a quiet place but they broke through the line and tackled him for a huge loss. Every where he turned he was blocked, sacked, and piled on.

In a strange twist, they finally ran the play called "The Cross", but it was the opposition that put it into action. They swept in and arrested Jesus, tried him, convicted him, and lifted him up to die. Instead of the end zone, instead of victory, there was only suffering, sacrifice, and surrender. In an instant the stadium was empty. In an instant the lights went out and the sky turned black. It was only noon, but a blanket of darkness descended on the whole earth.

You can't help but have a sad heart when you look at the field and you don't see one single disciple with Jesus at the end. His team left him. The crowd turned against him. His opponents crushed him. The voice from heaven had trumpeted his appearance at the beginning of the game, "This is my Son whom I love. With him I am pleased, well pleased." But now with the game over, as Jesus is all alone, it is left to a security guard, a Roman soldier, to shake his head in dismay and say, "Surely this man was the Son of God." A faithful friend showed up and took his dead and defeated body and buried him in the end zone, under the cross bars.

Football has latched onto the story of Jesus and used it for its own benefit. Pittsburgh Steelers fans believe in the Immaculate Reception. Countless teams pin their final hope on a Hail Mary touchdown pass. Every year when the teams hold the draft they are all praying for a Savior, a Messiah, to rescue the team. But the one thing about Jesus that has never really caught on is that play called "The Cross." That one is in nobody's play book except God.

Stadium was completely empty. It was early in the morning. A few faithful women climbed the fence and came in. They had some spices. They didn't dance, they didn't jump up and down, they didn't spin in circles. Their feet dragged along as they made their way to the cross bars, to where the tomb was. They knew where Jesus had been buried and they came to anoint his body. Their hearts were heavy and their spirits were crushed, but still they came. What else could they do? They loved Jesus. Even in defeat, they loved Jesus.

People continue to have a hard time believing what happened right there under the cross bars. Instead of a dead body they met the living Lord, alive and full of power and might and glory. God had a play no one ever dreamed of, a play that no defense could stop, a play that even old Satan had to bow down to. "The Resurrection." Only God has that play in his book. And on the third day Jesus was raised from the dead and ever since then, he has been the reigning King of Glory, the Prince of Peace, the Alpha and the Omega, and always and forever The Beloved Son of God.

He is out on the field even now. He is doing what he has always done, healing and bringing hope; reaching out to the brokenhearted and the grieving; grabbing the hand of the outcast and the lonely; casting out the demonic and setting people free to live the abundant life; shining a light into the darkest of places and giving meaning and purpose to life; calling, calling, forever and for always calling up to the countless number of spectators in the crowd, "Come down on the field. Come join my team. Come be my disciple." And over and above it all, every single day, the God of heaven, the great announcer in the sky, sends his booming voice to say, "This is my Son whom I love. With him I am well pleased."

Someone put a show together about the top ten Super Bowl commercials of all time. Number two is a commercial from way back in the days of the Steel Curtain, when Mean Joe Greene wore number 75 for the Pittsburgh Steelers. A little guy gives Mean Joe a bottle of Coke after a hard game, and that gesture of kindness melts Mean Joe's heart. He calls out, "Hey kid." And he throws him his jersey. That is nice. If you give something, you will get something in return. Number one was a Clydesdale horse that got cut from the Super Bowl team. He goes into training, and to the music of Rocky you see him doing all sorts of horse exercises, and sure enough, the next year he makes the team. That is nice. If you work hard you can reach your goal. We understand those commercials about giving and getting and working hard and we understand the ones about good looking guys and girls getting the fame and smart folks rising to the top.

Today I just wanted to remind you that there is another story you will not see on the commercials and you will not see on the field. It is not a story about us working hard and it is not about us doing something right or good, and believe me it is not a story about us looking good enough or being smart enough or having enough money to...I guess to win. The story I want you to be aware of today, whether you think of it in terms of football or any other metaphor, is the one where God sends his Son to save the world, and he does it by calling the play we know as "The Cross." He gives up his life. If you read the Bible you know that he gives up his life because he loves us.

Watch the commercials today. You won't hear that message. That's not Super Bowl type advertising, about a person loving others so much he would give up his life. But even if you did hear that story about a person giving up his life, it would not be the gospel story. You see, the gospel story is not just that any person gave up his life. It is that the one who gave up his life for others was the Son of God. He is the only one who by dying could actually save and set free and bring healing and life to the whole world. By the Cross and the Resurrection, God has brought life from death and defeated sin and its power. Jesus has won. He is the champion. In him and in him alone, is life.

God has shined the spotlight on Jesus. He is constantly directing our attention to Jesus. His voice is always calling out from the great announcer's booth in the sky. This is my Son. This Jesus, full of kindness and compassion, this is my Son. This Jesus, friend of the outcast and the sinner, this is my Son. This Jesus, healer of hearts that are broken, this is my Son. This Jesus, lover of the unlovely, this is my Son. This Jesus, rejected by human beings; this Jesus, hung on a cross; this Jesus, left to suffer and die; this Jesus, crucified dead and buried, this Jesus is my Son. And this Jesus, risen from the dead and exalted to highest heaven, this Jesus is my Son. Friends, never take your eyes off of this Jesus. And whenever your eyes are on this Jesus, may you hear the voice of the Father in heaven calling out for the whole world to hear, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."