

## Instant Replay

*“For though a righteous man falls seven times, he rises again...”*

*Proverbs 24:16*

Ladies, January is the time of year when some husbands might act strangely. They may be distracted, preoccupied and maybe not as attentive as usual. No, it's not another woman, it's the NFL playoffs.

Of course, pretty much everyone is aware of the upcoming Super Bowl, even if only for its funny commercials. But leading up to the big event are sudden-death playoffs, and though usually I'm pretty ho-hum about football, I get enthralled in the final moments of dramatic games when championships hang in the balance. The culmination of an entire season, including the fate of many sports careers, hinges on how well that elliptical, pigskin-covered ball is managed. It's carefully cradled and harbored by gargantuan bodies that seemingly spare no effort to protect it. Yet when it crosses the end zone for a touchdown what does the ball-handler do? Once points are on the board, he spikes the treasure into the ground so that it bounces who-knows-where. He may even do a little victory dance, so elated is he to have finished the task in glory for all to see. And the crowd cheers while going wild at the instant replay on the JumboTron.

Until the next play. If the same player fumbles miserably, his previous razzle-dazzle vanishes into ancient history. To add insult to injury, the blunder is not only viewed by tens of thousands in the stadium, it's also broadcast before millions on national TV. But the humiliation doesn't end there. His actions will undoubtedly highlight the sports news later that evening, and probably be replayed numerous times during the week as the analysts dissect what might have possibly been going through his head.

So it's understandable why players who goof can be inconsolable. Furthermore, any second-guessing and self-flagellation cause infinitely more harm than the initial setback. Not only to them but to their team, for if they don't mentally put the mistake behind them, they may never recover their game. And the higher the player's visibility, the greater is the risk of humiliation. I'll be honest, my heart pretty much always goes out to the solitary guy on the field who might be enlisted late in tight games—the field goal kicker. During those few agonizing seconds that must seem like hours, the weight of the game rests squarely on his shoulders. While his team watches and waits for the ball to sail through the uprights, everyone wonders. Will he leave the field amidst cheers from his teammates? Or will there be shouts of joy from the opposing team? And of course whatever he does will be captured on film and replayed for some time.

As intense as any one game can be, a single victory doesn't make a winning team, nor does one loss make a failure. Rather, a pattern of success must be established for players to be crowned winners; likewise repetitive losses make “cellar dwellers.” But really, there's no such thing as a perfect sports team. In fact the records of past Super Bowl winners show that the vast majority lost some games during their regular season. And no matter how great they were, all experienced their share of unsuccessful plays during any one game. So losses aren't strangers to the top football teams; the key is that failure isn't allowed to take up residency in their house. Yet only one team, the Super Bowl champion, won every time they needed to, up until the last game.

Now we as redeemed people are like players on God's team, adorned as if wearing a uniform that is His cloak of righteousness. And cheering us on is that great cloud of witnesses having gone before, including many heroes of the faith who might have suffered setbacks but nonetheless recovered to finish well (Hebrews 11). Similarly Paul, a strong finisher, likened spiritual self discipline to the sacrifice needed to win an important athletic competition (1 Corinthians 9:27).

However, the necessary mental discipline to make forward progress prohibits getting distracted by useless things, such as looping in our minds replays of past mistakes. To gaze in the spiritual mirror is right for evaluation and adjustment (James 1:23), but locking our eyes there isn't. So as much as I personally may be tempted to linger in self-absorption at times, it's necessary for me to isolate any setback as an expendable snapshot and care to be cast upon Him (1 Peter 5:7).

What a man thinks in his heart so is he (Proverbs 23:7), so if I replay failures and dwell on them in my heart, I risk becoming a spiritual casualty. But if my mind is set upon the greatness of His grace, well, my failures can't help but seem miniscule by comparison. His mercies are new every morning (Lamentations 3:23) and furthermore, more important than the periodic foible is our overall pattern and direction. Hopefully our trend is upward from where we were before, but regardless, as long as we're in the game God's grace and mercy remain ironclad. They never falter like we certainly can.

Yet in spite of our good intentions and best-laid plans to avoid evil, the invisible spiritual war makes danger of stumbling a continual hazard. One colorful movie character decades ago accurately observed, “A man's got to know his limitations.” Well, so does a woman, and though we can't undo past mistakes, we can trust His limitless provision to forgive us when we confess them (1 John 1:9). And though we may tend to Monday-morning quarterback bad decisions, a much more profitable practice is to choose His wisdom and make better decisions in the future. Including abandoning sin in action and attitude, lest Satan gain a foothold (2 Corinthians 2:10-11), hinder our forward progress and make us like benched players unable to recover their game.

Instant-replay technology wasn't always around in football, and it was never designed to inflict emotional pain and humiliation. Rather, its use both on and off the field is to promote excellence in the sport. On the field, an umpire's ruling can be challenged and overturned if warranted, while off the field a replay of the game shows coaches and players areas to adjust and strategize for future winning. Of course the players who bungled on film must dread watching the replays, while the stars who shined don't mind them at all.

And of course there remains a final replay for us at the Bema Seat of Christ. Then how well we followed His game plan will become known and rewarded accordingly (1 Corinthians 3:13-14).

Vince Lombardi, a Hall of Fame coach of numerous Super Bowl winners, said “Winning isn't everything, it's the only thing.” But those rewarded with the Crown of Life will know firsthand that winning eternally is above everything, and the only thing that really mattered.

- By Mary Nixon