

The Jersey Effect

Winning Without God

Frankton – 9/7/14

Scripture: Exodus 33.12-18

Proposition: Without God, everything we accomplish means little.

Today we start the series that's the reason for your wearing your jerseys today and for the next several weeks. [SLIDE] The series is titled: The Jersey Effect, and it comes from a book of the same name by Hunter Smith. Hunter was the Indianapolis Colts punter during the 2006-7 NFL season, the one when the Colts won the Super Bowl. Yes, Hunter the punter. Hunter is a devout Christian still living just outside of Indy in Zionsville. He wrote his book by inviting several players and coaches he knew were Christian to write to him and tell him the effect wearing a pro football jersey had on their lives. Tony Dungy, Matt Giordano, and Ben Utecht are some of those men whose stories are in the book. Hunter's purpose for writing the book was to write about the effect that wearing the jersey can have on a pro athlete, and also about the impact a pro player can have because of his jersey. You might be surprised to find out about the struggles all of these men had, even though they were successful professional athletes, adored by so many people. Over the next several weeks, we're going to take a look at their struggles and how we struggle with the same things, and how, with God's help, we can overcome those struggles. So let's get started.

I know there are people in here who can remember the "Miracle on Ice." I know it has nothing to do with the Colts, but I promise I'll get there. [SLIDE] Just as a reminder, the "Miracle on Ice" was a hockey game between the United States and the Soviet Union during the 1980 Olympic Games held in Lake Placid, NY. Previously, these two nations had a history, not only politically like in the Cold War, but at the hockey rink as well. Unfortunately for the US, the Soviets had used our hockey teams to sweep the ice time and time again. They had beaten us over and over again, always winning the gold and having us settle for the silver. And that streak was expected to continue in Lake Placid as well. The Soviets had a powerful team that was the hands down favorite win the gold medal yet again. The USA team, well, they were expected to play and lose to the Soviets. But the night of the game, a miracle happened. The USA outplayed the vaunted Soviets and beat them 4-3, by coming from a goal down in the last period. No one expected it. The world was shocked and that game became known as the "Miracle on Ice."

The Indianapolis Colts had their own version of a "Miracle on Ice" during their Super Bowl run. In the AFC Championship game, they were playing the dreaded New England Patriots. Much like the Soviets had repeatedly beaten the USA in hockey, New England had repeatedly beaten the Colts, breaking their hearts along the way. And this day in Indianapolis, it looked like the same thing was going to happen again. At halftime the Colts were trailing the Patriots 21-6. The Colts got the second half kick-off and went down the field to score. The defense held New England and the Colts scored again to tie it up and 21s. The teams traded touchdowns and field goals to leave the score knotted at 31s. The Patriots kicked a field goal with 3:49 left in the game to take a three point lead. And it looked like the Colts would fail again. However, [SLIDE] the Colt offense scored a touchdown with one minute to go and hope skyrocketed in the Colt nation. Maybe, just maybe, there would be a miracle and the Colts could hang on to win. And that's exactly what happened when Marlin Jackson picked off a Tom Brady pass at the end of regulation to seal the

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win for the Colts. They had finally beaten their arch-rivals, New England, and they were headed to the Super Bowl in Miami. Two weeks later, the Colts finished off their season by winning Super Bowl XLI (41) over the Chicago Bears in a driving rain.

[SLIDE] Jeff Saturday was a six time Pro-Bowl center who played for the Colts on that Super bowl winning team. He played for the Colts for 13 seasons and was one of the leaders on the team. He also played for the Packers a couple of years, then retired as a Colt. Saturday played two extremely important parts in that win over New England. So for the first part, he was in the right place at the right time. Down near the end zone, Dominic Rhodes took the hand-off but fumbled the ball into the end zone. Jeff Saturday was fortunate enough to fall on the ball for a Colt touchdown to tie the game at 28-all. Then later, in the final Colts drive, he provided the key block allowing Joseph Addai to score the winning touchdown. Jeff called that AFC Championship game his greatest game. And well it should be – not many centers get to score a touchdown as well as make the critical block for a touchdown. But his story doesn't start there.

Jeff's story actually starts a couple of years earlier. Jeff had been drafted by the Colts in 1999 – the same year they drafted Hunter Smith. He had made the team and had worked his way into the starting line-up. Over the next few years his play had made other people sit up and take notice. So much notice in fact, that after the 2004 season, the Colts gave Jeff a pretty big contract. He was well thought of inside the Colts organization, inside the NFL and by outsiders who were looking in. Then, after the 2005 season, Jeff was named to the Pro Bowl – the NFL version of the All-Star game. That made more people sit up and take notice. Then, the Colts won the Super Bowl and his fame sky-rocketed.

By this time, because of his success as an athlete, Jeff had been given a plethora of non-football business opportunities and by his own admission, he had tried to take them all. He was doing everything he could, trying to grab the brass ring while it was still there. He began to buy into the idea that because he was a good football player, that he would be good in everything else he did. In his words, **[SLIDE]** “I bought into the lie that I deserved all the money God had blessed me with.” Instead of being focused on football, and the opportunities it brings to share Christ with so many people, he was too busy chasing something, everything, else. Instead of embracing the credibility that God had given him through football, he was trying to invent a new credibility in business.

He began to start spending lots of time away from his wife and children. On top of being away for all the football things in his life, he was now being pulled away by all the non-football business doings in his life. Now, he admits he was doing the very thing that he had told his children not to do. You see, he had told his children, “Do the things God has given you the heart to do.” Jeff's heart was in football. Yet here he was doing the things the world told him he could do – every business opportunity that came his way. He was going to take what the world gave him. In reflection he wrote, **[SLIDE]** “There is something about the world that begs you to serve it.” He was striving for worldly prosperity. He had been suckered into the “prosperity gospel.”

Sidebar here for just a minute. There is something out there called the **[SLIDE]** “prosperity gospel” that goes something like this: financial blessings are the will of God for good Christians. So if you are a financially well-off Christian, it is because you have been a good Christian so God has blessed you. And the opposite is true: if you are in financial straits, God is withholding his

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blessing because you have not been a good Christian. The prosperity gospel comes down to this: if we have faith in God, he will deliver his promises of security and prosperity. Sadly, this isn't anything new to the church. I hope you understand that is not true. There are many people in our world who are financially well-off, but lack any Christian faith or morals. There are also very devout Christians who are in the midst of financial difficulties. Your financial well-being is not God's stamp of approval on your life, nor is your lack of finances his stamp of disapproval.

Many of the players in the book wrote about a single significant emotional event that made them sit up and take notice that they had strayed down the wrong path. Jeff's was more of a process – no single event. But after winning the Super Bowl, after all the business opportunities that came to him, God worked on him and he came to understand he had strayed from God's path for his life. He understood that there is more to God's world than worldly pleasures and worldly accolades. When Jeff looks back at how God shaped his character through all the ups and downs, sinful experiences with prosperity, distractions and pursuit of worldly things, he understands something a lot of people fail to grasp. He wrote, [SLIDE] “God has taken the mountaintop experiences of this world to reveal my true character and deepest flaws.” The lessons we learn on the mountain prepare us for the valleys that will inevitably come because mountaintops don't last forever.

There's a famous line in Ecclesiastes 3 which reads: [SLIDE] *For everything there is a season...a time to be born and a time to die.* [1,2] When we in the world play along with the world's idea of success, no matter what that means, we have deviated from the path God wants us to be on. When that happens, it is the season for us to die, not physically, but rather spiritually. God wants us to recognize our vulnerability to what the world calls success, to deny it, and then worship him. We cannot worship at the altar of worldly success, worldly popularity, worldly materialism, and also worship at God's altar too. We have to give up those things of the world and just worship at God's altar. We must not fall into the trap of David's son, Solomon, who spent seven years building God's Temple, but thirteen years building his own palace. We must ask ourselves the question: Whose temple are we making a priority?

There are very few people who have handled worldly success well. Even in the bible, there were just a few characters who handled worldly success well, most did not. Take Israel's King David for example. He had it all. He was king of one of the mightiest nations in the Ancient Near East. His armies beat every foe they came up against. His country's wealth grew exponentially while he reigned. He was beloved by his followers. Even God had called him friend. King David had it all, including Bathsheba – one of the things he shouldn't have had. He committed adultery with her, then had her husband, Uriah (a decorated soldier in David's army), killed to “cover it up.” And those two sins changed the path of his life forever. The baby born of adultery died. Later one of David's sons raped one of David's daughters. Another son killed the rapist son. Yet another son actually took the kingdom from David for a short while through armed rebellion. And that's why this issue is so important. Success causes the spiritual death and destruction of so many prosperous people.

Here's one more lesson about success from our scripture today. Let me set it up for you. When our scripture takes place, God had already called Moses to lead his people out of Egypt. Moses did so with the help of God's ten plagues. God had already given the nation the Ten Commandments and other laws. He had already made a covenant with them to be their God. Now, in our scripture, God tells Moses to lead his people to the Promised Land. (We might say that the

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Promised Land represents “success.”) But, Moses is hesitant. That’s no different than he has been throughout this whole endeavor. He hesitated when God called him at the burning bush. He was hesitant about standing up to Pharaoh. He hesitated leaving Egypt. Now is no different. Exodus 33 shows us Moses hesitating one more time. God again tells Moses to take his people to the Promised Land – a land flowing with milk and honey! But Moses responds: **[SLIDE]** *If you don’t personally go with us, then don’t make us leave this place.* **[SLIDE]** *For your presence among us sets your people and me apart from all other people on the earth.* [EX 33.15-16] In Moses’ eyes, without God, there is no victory. Without God, there is no success.

This whole idea of winning without God’s presence is a bunch of hooley. You see, if God isn’t with Jeff Saturday as he pursues his business endeavors, then Jeff shouldn’t pursue them. Hunter the Punter is trying to pursue success in music. If God isn’t with him in that pursuit, then he shouldn’t pursue it. If God isn’t with you as you strive for success in whatever you strive for success in, whether it’s academia or athletics, business or baby-sitting, farming or finance, then you shouldn’t pursue them. **[SLIDE]** Too often we strive for success more than we yearn for God’s presence. We seem to relate to the folks who were making the tower of Babel. They wanted to make the tower to make a name for themselves. They weren’t seeking God; they were seeking their own glory. They wanted to become God. And they failed.

If you are trying to make your own name great, like longing for a position of influence in Frankton, or wanting a Saturday car dealership like Jeff, then that’s like the tower of Babel. Trying to look good all the time is a doomed goal. The idol of looking good just doesn’t work. We need to surrender to the control of God. He alone makes our names great. There’s freedom in allowing God to do what he wants with our names. We exhaust ourselves trying to run the show – trying to play the role of savior in our lives and everyone else’s lives. Just let God be God. He knows best anyway, so let him take control. It’s time to die to everything the world has to offer and strive for God’s presence.