

The Advantage of Losing

By John Carlson, Guest Speaker

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Scripture Readings

2 Corinthians 12:1-10

I must go on boasting. Although there is nothing to be gained, I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord. ² I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know—God knows. ³ And I know that this man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows—⁴ was caught up to paradise and heard inexpressible things, things that no one is permitted to tell. ⁵ I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses. ⁶ Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool, because I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain, so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say, ⁷ or because of these surpassingly great revelations. Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. ⁸ Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. ⁹ But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. ¹⁰ That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. **For when I am weak, then I am strong.**

Mark 8:31-35

³¹ He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. ³² He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³ But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. “Get behind me, Satan!” he said. “You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.”

³⁴ Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵ **For whoever wants to save their life^[a] will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it.**

John 12:20-24

²⁰ Now there were some Greeks among those who went up to worship at the festival. ²¹ They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, with a request. “Sir,” they said, “we would like to see Jesus.” ²² Philip went to tell Andrew; Andrew and Philip in turn told Jesus.

²³ Jesus replied, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴Very truly I tell you, **unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.**

The Real Story

A gentleman was on his way home one day and stopped to watch a Little League base ball game that was being played in a park nearby. As he sat down behind the bench on the first-base line, he asked one of the boys what the score was. “We’re behind 14 to nothing,” he answered with a smile.

“Really?”, the man said. “You don’t look very discouraged!”

“Discouraged?”, the boy asked with a puzzled look. “Why should we be discouraged? We haven’t been up to bat yet.”

So perhaps if we are feeling a little behind, or like we can’t win, we should just wait until they put us up to bat. I hope today to challenge some of our conventional thinking about winning and losing.

Have you ever driven down a random street on a warm Saturday with people are out raking or mowing or washing the car? Ever looked in the open garages to see the stuff? No cars. They are filled with stuff. A really good business to own is a storage service. People pay good money just to store accumulated stuff.

Contrast that to how we react when we hear someone had a house fire or a flood, or tornado and “lost everything.” The community responds: heartfelt sorrow, fundraisers, disaster relief volunteering. I am not critical of either storage units or disaster relief. I am thinking of the focus of our culture on possessions and how bad it is to lose them. We have created a culture based on some false thinking that possessions have huge value and the loss of them is a huge disaster. I suggest that our journey of faith might lead us to some radical conclusions about loss. I might even end up suggesting there is some advantage to losing.

Well, of course, there are many kinds of loss: physical, emotional, relational, spiritual, practical and so on. I think of the homeless folks with whom we here hold some care and compassion. What have they lost along the way? What did they once have and cherished which is now gone? What have we each learned when we have lost?

Author Robert Fulghum shared a story about an encounter with a young woman. It was at the Hong Kong airport, 1984, tensely occupying the next chair. Her scars, dirt and backback told of a long summer of hardy traveling.

Suddenly, tears began to drip from her chin. He imagined some lost love or some sad farewell. Fulghum goes on.

"When you began to sob you drew me into your sadness. Guess you had been very alone and very brave for some time. A good cry was in order. And weep you did. All over me. A monsoon of grievous angst. My handkerchief and your handkerchief and most of a box of tissues and both your sleeves were needed to dry up the flood before you finally got it out.....your plane was about to go and you had lost your ticket."

"After we dried you off, I and a nice older couple from Chicago who were also swept away in the tide of your tears, offered to take you to lunch and to talk to the airlines about some remedy. You stood up to go with us, turned around to pick up your belongings. And SCREAMED! I thought you had been shot. But no...It was your ticket. You had found your ticket. You had been sitting on it for three hours."

There are a lot of ways we may be sitting on our own ticket to where we need to go next. And in the course of our despair, we assume it is lost.

When we talk about losing, we quickly think of games and sports. Winning and losing is all part of the game. And we love it when our team achieves the nationals, or the Superbowl, or some other honor. We love to win. We play to win. But there are some perspectives.

Mickey Mantle said:

"During my 18 years I came to bat almost 10,000 times. I struck out about 1700 times and walked maybe 1800 times. You figure a ballplayer will average about 500 bats a season. Doing the math, that means I played seven years without every hitting a ball."

Michael Jordan shared:

"I've missed more than 9,000 shots in my career. I've lost about 300 games. 26 times I was trusted to take the game winning shot and I missed. I've failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed."

What about Ellen of TV Fame? Do you know Portia de Rossi? She's married to Ellen. She is an Australian Actress and writer. She struggled with image and esteem. She was taught young that losing was shameful. Portia says, "Even when I took first prize, topped the class, won the race, I never really won anything. I was merely avoiding the embarrassment of losing." We become conditioned to fear losing. Faith teaches us to embrace loss. It eventually becomes the foundation of meaning of all experience. Later in her journey, Portia has a new suggestion: "I highly recommend inviting the worst-case scenario into your life."

There were three scripture texts read today. When we study music, we learn the impact of the brief statement of the theme, known as the MOTIF. All composition contains some form of basic musical statement which is then interwoven throughout the entire piece. It is called the motif. In a symphony concerto, for example, every instrument is eventually involved in expressing the motif directly, indirectly, and through variations. The casual listener may not even be aware of the incredibly interwoven communication of the theme. The motif is one, two, maybe three measures of that theme. All good communication expresses a theme, a motif. There were three today:

2 Cor. 12:10 For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Mark 8:35 Whoever wants to save their life^[a] will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it.

John 12:24 Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.

Jesus prepared for what he knew was to come. And the metaphor of dying to rise and overcome was forever inaugurated.

“For a seed to achieve its greatest expression, it must come completely undone. The shell cracks, the inside comes out and everything changes. To someone who doesn’t understand, it would look like complete destruction.”

— Cynthia Ocelli, (Author of *Resurrecting Venus*)

When we achieve that spiritual understanding of life, our coming undone, our greatest losses, become the critical moment for resurrection of our very soul. Every loss we encounter takes us to the deeper level we need to reach to encounter a victory.

It is quite comfortable to remain in denial about loss. Thus we fear potential loss. But as we advance on our own spiritual journey, we can possibly reach a state of boldness, of confidence, of hope, really – that the future will provide ample exposure to enough pain to know who we are and why we breath. Life pain becomes the nutrition in the soil of purpose. While we may not ask for pain, we no longer fear it. We view and approach challenge with anticipation and hope. We look for the value seeds of life nestled in the soil of experience, fed with the nutrition of pain.

As I prepared for today, I ran across Rob Sheffield and his book, *Love is a Mix Tape*. From the story of his life, love and loss, I quote:

“People say, ‘Whatever doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.’ Even people who say this must realize the exact opposite is true. What doesn’t kill you maims you, cripples you, leaves you weak, makes you whiney and full of yourself at the same time. The more pain, the more pompous you get. Whatever doesn’t kill you makes you incredibly annoying.”

It is the greatest paradoxical metaphor of life: Something must die to live.

The greatest losses we all know are those of relationship. Angela Miller is the author of *Seven Things I’ve Learned from the Loss of my Child*. Angela puts the dilemma this way:

Though I will grieve the death of my son forever and then some, it does not mean my life is lacking happiness and joy. Quite the contrary, in fact. It is not either/or, it’s both/and. Grief and joy can and do coexist. My life is more rich now. I live from a deeper place. I love deeper still. Because I grieve, I also know a joy like no other. The joy I experience now is far deeper and more intense than the joy I experienced before my loss. Such is the alchemy of grief.

Because I’ve clawed my way from the depths of unimaginable pain, suffering and sorrow, again and again— when the joy comes, however and whenever it does— it is a joy that reverberates through every pore of my skin and every bone in my body. I feel all of it, deeply. I embrace and thank every blessed morsel of it. My life now is more rich and vibrant and full, not despite my loss, but *because* of it. In grief there are gifts, sometimes many. These gifts don’t in any way make it all “worth” it, but I am grateful beyond words for each and every gift that comes my way. I bow my head to each one and say *thank you, thank you, thank you*. Because there is nothing— and I mean absolutely nothing— I take for granted. Living life in this way gives me greater joy than I’ve ever known possible.

I have my son to thank for that. Being his mom is the best gift I’ve ever been given. Even death can’t take that away.

— Angela Miller, 2015

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall. H. D. had a great fall. All the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't put Humpty back together again.

The earliest known version was published in [Samuel Arnold's *Juvenile Amusements*](#) in 1797^[7] with the lyrics:

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall,
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall.
Four-score Men and Four-score more,
Could not make Humpty Dumpty where he was before.^[8]

So the metaphor emerges: healing comes from an internal force of energy and faith – not from an external power. No kings can fix Humpty. He must search and find and get in touch with the love that created him in the first place. Then he has a chance to be a living soul again. Jesus put it more simply: 'You must be born again.'

I most appreciate wisdom and truth through metaphor, allegory and story. Jesus loved to tell stories. To close on the subject of loss: let me tell you a story.

A water bearer in India had two large pots, each hung on one end of the pole he carried across the back of his neck. One of the pots had a crack in it, and while the other pot was perfect and always delivered a full portion of water at the end of the long walk from the stream, the cracked pot arrived only half full. This went on every day for two years, with the bearer delivering only one and a half pots of water to his master's house.

Of course, the perfect pot was proud of its accomplishment and saw itself as perfectly suited for the purpose for which it was made. But the poor cracked pot was ashamed of its imperfection and miserable that it was able to accomplish only half of what it had been made to do. After two years of what it perceived as bitter failure, it spoke to the water bearer one day by the stream. "I am ashamed of myself and I want to apologize to you."

"Why?" asked the bearer. "What are you ashamed of?"

"For the past two years, I have been able to deliver only half my load because this crack in my side causes water to leak out all the way back to your master's house. Because of my flaws you have to work without getting the full value of your efforts," the pot said.

The water bearer felt sorry for the old cracked pot, and out of compassion he said, "As we return to the master's house, I want you to notice the beautiful flowers along the path." Indeed, as they went up the hill, the old cracked pot

took notice of the sun warming the wildflowers on the side of the path. The pot felt cheered.

But at the end of the trail, the pot still felt bad because it had leaked out half its load, and again it apologized for its failure. The bearer said to the pot, "Did you notice that there were flowers only on your side of your path, but not on the other pot's side? That's because I knew about your flaw and took advantage of it. I planted flower seeds on your side of the path, and every day while we walk back from the stream, you've watered them for me. For two years I have been able to pick these beautiful flowers to decorate my master's table. If you were not just the way you are, with all your cracks and imperfections, he would not have such beauty to grace his house.

We are all cracked pots. And perhaps it is our very imperfection which gives hope and comfort to another soul along the path.

It is possible to live every day with anticipation and expectation. Not with expecting what I have predetermined to be to my advantage. But anticipation of a new revelation for the day that adds beauty and purpose to my life. A revelation achieved only when I have let go of life as it is. I've got a ways to go. But I have a hunch that there could be some advantages to losing.