

Passing Our Sons Through Fire

Valley Center Seventh-day Adventist Church

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Through the wondrous power of the Gospel, God proposes to do for us what we can't do for ourselves. It may be that you've pulled a sliver from your own finger. I've heard of people who have done some pretty amazing things on themselves medically, but you could never do heart surgery on yourself, much less heart transplant surgery, could you? Someone else would have to do that for you. Through the Gospel, God proposes to give us a new heart. We can't do it ourselves.

I've heard of people who have taken their lives by their own hand; by gunshot, by poison, by sword or by jumping to their death, but I've never heard of anyone who successfully crucified himself. How could you do that? Even if you were able to nail your feet to a cross and then one hand, how would you nail the other hand to the crossbeam? And then how would you lift the cross up and put it in its place? If you were going to be crucified, it would have to be done by someone else. In a spiritual sense, we are called to "be crucified with Christ." Paul said that through the Gospel, we "are crucified" with Christ, nevertheless we live. It is He Who lives through us. Our sinful self is put to death and we live new to Him. We can't do that on our own, but God will do it for us if we let Him.

So He brings new life and a new way of thinking into our minds. The message today is a personal testimony of how God has changed my way of thinking. I invite you to give the thoughts I'm about to share prayerful consideration, and see whether these things be so.

While still at the foot of Mt. Sinai, having left Egypt, Moses was instructed to teach Israel, "And you shall not let any of your descendants pass through the fire to Molech, nor shall you profane the name of your God: I am the LORD." Leviticus 18:21. About eight centuries after that we read, "Declare to them their abominations. For they have committed adultery, and blood is on their hands. They have committed adultery with their idols, and even sacrificed their sons whom they bore to Me, passing them through the fire, to devour them." Ezekiel 23:36, 37. There are at least another half dozen references in the Old Testament to "passing sons through the fire."

What exactly was "passing their sons through fire"? This was a type of idolatrous ritual that involved a young person, a boy or girl, being required to risk their life in going through fire. Many died in so doing, and their deaths were accounted as necessary sacrifices to the deity which was being worship, be it Molech or Chemosh or Baal. If on the other hand, through some good fortune, the youth was successful in making it through alive, then they were looked upon as

heroes, deities in their own right, and lived a privileged and sumptuous life. The rules of society didn't apply to them; they could live as they pleased and were above the law. We don't have anything like that in our world today, do we? We're far beyond the paganism of the Old Testament, aren't we? We don't "pass our sons through fire," in this enlightened age, do we?

As I said, I want to share with you a personal testimony this morning. I want to tell you how God has changed my life, my way of thinking and doing. To do that, I will have to share a few details so that you'll understand the burden the Lord has placed on my heart. I should introduce myself. Hi, my name is John. I'm an addict. I grew up in San Diego, California, in a wonderful and stable home. I grew up living in the world of sports, almost literally. I was born in a hospital that no longer exists. Quinhardt hospital was in the Point Loma area, near where the San Diego Sports Arena now exists. Throughout my life I've commented on this somehow having significance. My love of sports was partly inherited; on many a Sunday my dad would have two TVs going (this was long before there was anything like "picture in picture"), to be able to keep up with two different games, and sometimes a radio would also be present for a game that wasn't televised.

But I can't put blame on my dad for my sports addiction. It was what I wanted and craved. I remember when I was 8 or 10 that we had a neighbor, Mrs. Kler, who subscribed to a magazine called the "Sporting News," and every year she would receive, along with her subscription, a small book, pocket size, that contained a treasure-trove of baseball statistical information on every team; batting averages, e.r.a.'s, r.b.i.'s, it was all there. Every year when she received the new book, last year's edition was tenderly bequeathed into my waiting hands, and I would pour over the material in that book with an interest worthy of nobler content. All the pertinent facts were committed to memory and I could reel off quotations and statistics when needed.

Somewhere in that time period I acquired a crystal radio set, which, if you don't know, was a pre-transistor radio that required no battery. It was tuned by pulling a small stem in or out, thus locking on to the various a.m. stations. It had two wires; a ground which was clipped to a metal surface (my bunk bed frame was perfect for this), and an earplug.

KFI, the Los Angeles station that carried the Dodgers (this was before the San Diego Padres were a major league baseball team) came in clearly at night, and the golden voice of Vin Scully kept me informed and entertained by his dynamic play by play reporting. To this day, if I think about it for a moment, I can recall the entire 1958 or 1959 Dodger team, outfield, infield, catchers, starting pitchers and relief pitchers.

Naturally, sports was not just a "spectator" thing. I reveled in the competition of sport. Some school days were good, some bad, but there was one day that was highlight of the whole year, at least for me. It was approached with salivated expectation. That was the annual picnic day, held at El Monte Park, when classes could compete in various sporting activities. How our class softball team would look forward to beating those juniors or sophomores, or whichever team we would be pitted against! The intensity of the rivalry! The joy of victory or the humbling of defeat! These

games would be relished and re-lived in the conversations of students for weeks and memorialized in the school annual.

Nor did the thirst for the thrill of sports diminish as I grew older. I well remember when at last my darling Rams (the then Los Angeles football team) made it to the super bowl, the final showdown game, in 1980. All season long their progress had been patiently observed and cheered, and now they had the chance to win "the big one." Alas! I was asked to perform a wedding on that momentous Sunday, at the very time of the game!

What to do? The week before, my wife and I purchased, at some considerable sacrifice, a newly marketed device called a video-recorder. Common now, and much less expensive, the Sony Betamax was revolutionary. It set us back \$1,000.00 (which was a lot of money in 1980), and the tapes cost \$20.00 each. We had to drive from San Marcos to Poway to find someone who sold tapes. Never mind. No trial, hardship or sacrifice was too great. We would tape the spectacle and watch it later, after the wedding reception.

The number of dollars and the number of hours spent in the watching and attending of sporting events through my life rose beyond calculation. I was a sports addict. Three games on Sunday at three hours each; you do the math. Special packages available by satellite or cable so that you can see every baseball, football or hockey game; not a problem. Someone gave us a small plaque which hung in our hallway for many years that read, "I love to watch the seasons pass," and underneath was written, "golf, baseball, football, basketball." You get the picture.

Recently, the Lord began speaking to my heart, in the matter of sports. I share with you today some of the reasons why I believe it is in God's providence for me that sports are no longer in my life. Sports was my friend. I couldn't conceive of living without opening the morning paper to see who was playing that day on TV. How could there be life after sports? And yet, God did surgery on my heart and changed my way of thinking so that I have been delivered from this addiction. As I share the principles that the Lord has pressed upon my mind, give them careful consideration and see whether these things be so. These things are shared without condemnation or reprisal. After all, for sixty years I was immersed in that world.

What did the Lord teach me that caused me to turn from sports? First, it comes to me that the phenomenon of sports in today's world is hardly different from the ritual of "passing our sons through fire" in ancient times. What were the components of that system? It involved putting one's body into a situation of extreme risk, with the very real possibility of serious danger or death, for the sake of gaining a status in society in which you were looked upon as being extraordinary, a hero, even as a god. It put you into a class that was indulged and coddled; the rules didn't apply to you.

Is this not precisely what the world of sport represents today? Think of the dangers that are posed to the physical body in the name of sport, which are accepted almost without question. I was watching the game in which quarterback Joe Theisman of the Washington Redskins suffered that break in his leg which left it in a completely unnatural position. We were at the game in Oakland

when Bo Jackson suffered his career-ending injury. I was watching when Darryl Stingley of the New England Patriots was hit by the forearm of Raider Jack Tatum and was turned into a quadriplegic. Those of us who live in San Marcos remember the tragic injury to high school student Scotty Eveland who suffered a critical head injury while playing football and lapsed into a coma. The injuries and brutality in sports is appalling.

What is the background of the word “arena”? It comes from the Latin word (also Spanish) for “sand,” recalling the material placed on the floor of the Coliseum to make it easy to clean up the blood of the gladiators or victims of lions. Have we returned to the violence and barbarism of ancient Rome? When do the hockey fans stand on their feet? Is it not when there is “blood on the ice,” as the result of a brutal hit or gloveless fist fight?

This prospect of injury in sports has become a concern to many. I’m holding a copy of our local newspaper, the North County Times, dated November 22, 2009, in which the front page features a story entitled, “Tragic legacy: severe brain injuries seen after football careers.” In this article are listed numerous accounts of head injuries from concussions received in football. Talk to any retired NFL lineman, like Ron Mix, who used to play for the San Diego Chargers, about the condition of his knees and he will tell you that a large sacrifice was paid for playing sports and subjecting his body to the cruelty that takes place.

There is a stewardship issue involved here. The Bible declares that we have been “fearfully and wonderfully made.” Psalm 139:13. Do we fully appreciate the divine engineering that went into the design of our bodies? The Bible teaches us that we have been “bought by a price,” and that our bodies are the “temple of God.” I Corinthians 6:19, 20. Do we have the right to subject our bodies, God’s “temple,” to unnecessary risk for the payment of thrill?

What if I excuse myself in saying that “I don’t do those things; I just enjoy watching others on TV take those risks.” What is Heaven’s view of this? The Bible teaches that I don’t have to personally participate in something to be held accountable for it. The Lord spoke to me through a passage in Romans in which Paul writes of God’s judgment coming on those who not only “practice” wrongful things, but also those who “approve of those who practice them.” Romans 2:32.

What is it that fuels the momentum of the world of sports? Yes, there’s the “glory” of it. But is it not to a large degree the lucrative salaries, the multi-million dollar pot of gold at the end of the rainbow that induces young people to put their bodies through the rigor necessary to reach that last rung on the ladder of sports achievement? Where does that money come from? It is generated by ticket sales, by television contracts and the sales of sports related gear bearing the logo trademark of teams.

There are thirty major league baseball teams, each of which has a roster of 25 active players. That means that there are only 750 men, from the entire world who, at any given time are privileged to play at the sport’s top level. There must be 1,000 times as many who will strive their utmost and put their bodies through rigorous effort and potential harm in attempting to reach the highest

plateau. The same could be said for football, basketball and other sports. Is this an honorable usage of the gift of health, strength and vitality that the Lord has given us?

Our present *schools* may well be categorized as “sports mills.” How much of any school’s budget is expended toward its sports programs? How does the salary of the head coach compare with the salary of the one who teaches History or English? There are basically two ways in which we recognize value in our culture, and that is with time and money. How much time and how much money is spent toward sports in our educational system? Receiving an education is placed lower in priority to achieving for the college team.

When my wife taught at Palomar College, a student who had taken her class but failed came up to her matter-of-factly and said, “I need you to change my grade from ‘F’ to ‘C’ so that I can play in the next game.” He expressed shock when my wife refused, saying that grades were earned by performance, not handed out by demand. What is it that identifies a college or university these days? It’s the success of their sports teams. The more successful, the more the alumni will support with their contributions. Make it a bowl game at the end of the season, and your school will reap millions of dollars. Were schools invented for learning, or for sports?

By the way, it’s not possible that our SDA Schools, the institutions that were brought into existence for the express purpose of training missionaries to tell the world of Jesus’ coming, would be caught up in this, would it? Our schools are different than those of the world, aren’t they?

When an athlete reaches that highest rung of achievement, he or she is placed on the platform of “hero.” They are looked upon differently. Often they are given a “pass” when the law is violated. Murderers have escaped justice in the name of their celebrity status, simply because they could run faster or throw straighter than their fellow human beings. Often *justice has been set aside* in the name of sport achievement. Isn’t this what happened centuries ago when they “passed their sons through fire”?

Those who achieve success are “idolized” by their adoring fans. People line up for hours just to see their favorite hero, or obtain a picture or autograph. Is this “*idolatry*” in the biblical sense? An easy way to determine that is to ask, “What is it that has my supreme interest and devotion? In what area do I spend my time and money? What is it that ‘gets me up in the morning’?” If I have time for the sports page or telecast, but no time for Bible study and prayer, that’s a pretty clear indication of what I value the most, what I worship.

There are a few other things that the Lord pointed out to me. Think of the *deception* that is interwoven within sports. In baseball, the pitcher is trying to fool the batter. The runner on base is trying to fake out the pitcher. In basketball, the shooter fakes out his opponent by pretending to jump, so that while the one guarding is coming down, he can then take his jump shot. The hockey player “dekes” (fakes out) the goalie so that he can score. *Sports teaches you that to be successful you have to deceive.* The outfielder dives and holds up his glove showing he caught the ball, when the video replay shows clearly that he trapped it. Has it ever happened that a batter was called

out on a fly ball and then the fielder said to the umpire, "I'm sorry Mr. Umpire, but I didn't really catch the ball. The batter is really safe." Deception within sports is rampant.

We find within sports another phenomenon. Satan delights in taking those themes which are of utmost importance and trivializing them. He mocks God by getting people to place on a common level those terms which should be viewed with somber reflection. Who are sent forth from God to minister to us for eternal salvation? They're angels, aren't they. What does the Bible call those who have made a commitment to God to follow His ways in the paths of righteousness? Saints. Who is the enemy that stalks our path and seeks our eternal destruction? It's the devil, isn't it. What are his agents called who work with him to cause our death? Demons. And yet these are the popular names of sports teams, and by common usage, those words lose their significance! We became desensitized as to what it means to be a "saint" of God; we lose sight of the fact that there is a devil who is seeking whom he may destroy.

Finally, the Lord pointed me to the fact that sports is built on the foundation of supremacy. The sports world is permeated with the passionate pursuit of being "first." Of whose spirit does that partake in a larger way; Christ's or Satan's? Is it not true that Satan said, "I will ascend into heaven; I will exalt my throne above the stars of God." Isaiah 14:13. Of Jesus, it is said, He "made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a servant, and coming in the likeness of men," He humbled himself to the point of death. Philippians 2:7.

I have come to see that sports is about the passionate pursuit of supremacy. It does not harmonize with the spirit of heaven, which is filled with peace and not contention. It is not in conformity with the selfless and lowly attitude of Christ. Didn't Jesus say, "The one who wants to be great, let him be servant"? Try to imagine a football game in which the defendant says, "Oh sir, I perceive that you wish to carry that object in this direction; let me get out of your way so that you may proceed." Or imagine a basketball game in which the guard says, "My friend, it looks like you want to place that ball into this basket. Here, let me help you up." Is that possible? No! What is the message of football? Is it not "Get out of my way, or I'll run you over"? Or, on the other side of the line, isn't it, "If you try to cross that scrimmage line, I'll knock you down." Is the essence of sport closer to the spirit of Christ or of Satan? The look of proud arrogance on the face of the athlete speaks volumes.

The passionate striving for supremacy. Isn't that the point upon which Satan fell? I will ascend, I will place my throne above the stars. I, I, I. What does it mean when sports figures or fans raise their hand with their index finger uplifted. Is it more in keeping with the spirit of Christianity or Satan? Did you ever say, verbally or in your heart, while watching that lineman pursue the quarterback, "Kill him, kill him"? Is it possible to imbibe the spirit of sport and then contemplate the lowly character of Jesus?

The Lord has delivered me from something I thought I couldn't live without. He has changed my way of thinking. This is the first year I can say I saw not one football game. The purpose of this life is to prepare to live with God and His angels in heaven, where there is peace, harmony and

contentment. I invite you to give these thoughts prayerful consideration, to see whether these things are so.