

Missing Field Goals

I don't know how many of you were watching the N.F.L. wildcard game between the Philadelphia Eagles and the Chicago Bears a couple weeks ago. I am not a fan of either team, but it happened to be on the TV when I turned it on and it appeared to be a good game. So, I started watching. And as the time ticked down to the final seconds, Eagles were winning by only 1 point, the Bears were ready to make a game-winning field goal. They brought in their former Pro-Bowl placekicker, Cody Parkey, to kick a 43 yard field goal. Now, in the pros, that distance for a field goal is very makeable and everyone expected Cody to boot the ball right on through the uprights. And that is exactly what he did—well, on the first kick, that is. But, the first kick didn't count. You see, just before the ball was snapped, the Eagles coach called a time out which nullified this first successful kick. And so Cody lined up to kick again. The ball was snapped; he kicked it, and as it sailed toward the goal posts it seemed to be trailing toward the left. And rather than going straight on through, the ball hit the left upright post, fell down and then hit the cross piece, and bounced to the ground without ever crossing through the goal posts. The kick was no good, and the game came to an end. And so, the Eagles won 16-15. Rather, than being the

hero, Cody Parkey was now—in the eyes of many people in Chicago—the goat of the game.

But, that was not the game's highlight. The highlight, as far as I am concerned, occurred in the minute or so after the game time expired. Clearly, Cody Parkey was dejected. For those of you who have played sports, and your team loses because of something you did or didn't do—well, it's like a stabbing pain that makes you feel like melting into the ground. And I could see that pained look on Cody's face. But, then came the real highlight of the game—at least for me it was. Just for a second, Cody looked toward the Heavens, and in a gesture that you'd typically see of some player upon catching a TD pass, Cody looked up and pointed his fingers skyward to Heaven—it is a Christian gesture that many athletes use as a sign of praise to God. *That was the highlight of the game*—maybe even of the entire season. Giving praise to God, even when we fail—that is a sign of true faith.

Now, even after that, you might have expected Cody to go hide in the locker room. But no, that's not where he headed. Rather, he trotted over to another group of players from both teams. What were they doing? They had gathered at mid-field and were kneeling in prayer to God. And as Cody knelt in prayer with them, the TV camera focused on him in that the prayer group for a second or two until the TV

producers realized that they were praying. Of course, once they realized that they were praying publically—well, they couldn't show any of that stuff on TV, you know—their viewers might be offended—somebody might feel uncomfortable. After all people in the viewing audience might have been exposed to faith—and the TV producers certainly could not have that kind of thing being aired. And so the camera's quickly turned away from this prayer scene of opposing players—Bears and Eagles, all giving thanks to God—the Eagles in good times and the Bears in the worst of times, from a game perspective.

Now despite the telecasters' best efforts to cut away from all of this post-game display of Christian faith, Cody Parkey's gesture of praise did not go unnoticed. Sports Spectrum is an organization that covers Christian athletes, and on its website, reporter, Jason Romano, aptly put this into perspective when he commented: "Parkey's reaction is a great reminder that there are many more important things than football. Jesus remains on the throne in good times and bad." Garrett Kell, the pastor of Del Ray Baptist Church in Alexandria, Virginia, added in a tweet: "People often give glory to God after making great plays. Much respect to Cody Parkey, who after missing the game winning field goal, pointed his hand to Heaven and then bent his knee before His God. I respect that."¹

I know that I sometimes have stood in front of my congregation and bemoaned the fact that America is becoming so depraved—how our morals have so declined over the past 50 years—as if 50 years ago we were such a devote, Christian nation. But, ask yourself, how many times did you see a young athlete give praise to God while on the field back in the 1960's or 1970's? I was a bigger football and baseball fan back then, than now, and I rarely recall seeing any. So we can take heart—there are still good young Christian men and women who are strong for the Lord.

Now as it turns out, one of the Philadelphia Eagles' linemen, Treyvon Hester, claims to have just barely tipped the football that Cody Parkey kicked. And it appears from slow-motion replays that that is true. He ever so slightly was able to barely skim the ball as it passed by—just enough to make it veer off course and hit the uprights. Some people would say that he was just *lucky*, or that Cody was *unlucky*. But, I don't believe in luck—and neither does Cody. You see, this wasn't the first time that Cody missed a field goal this year by hitting the goal post. Back in November, in a game against the Detroit Lions, he hit the goal post four times—I don't think anyone has ever done that before in one football game. They probably couldn't even do it if they tried. But, luck or lack of luck had nothing to do with it then, nor did luck have anything

to do with it in the Bears-Eagles game. It is not the hand of fate, but the *Hand of God*, that governs the affairs of His people—in good times, and certainly in bad times, as well. During that Lions game, the coaches on the sidelines expressed to Cody their displeasure with his results. Later, when reporters asked him about this, he made it clear that luck had nothing to do with it. Cody said: “Of course they’re frustrated with me, but who’s more frustrated than myself? I mean, this is my job, this is what I’m supposed to do, and I’m missing out there. I’ve got just to trust in what I’m doing and trust that *MY LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST MAKES NO MISTAKES*. For whatever reason, that was the day I was supposed to have.”² And, missing that field goal in the wildcard game—that too was the day he was supposed to have. Now before I start sounding like a Calvinist (which I can assure you—I am not), I want you to consider why God would have one of His children experience such an awful day. Why put a faithful Christian, like Cody, through something like that? Closer to home, why, at times, does God put us through something like that?

Well, in order to start understanding the answer, I can point to quite a number of God’s people who went through a lot worse than missing a few field goals. When Cody missed those kicks, his Chicago teammates didn’t beat him senseless with their football helmets. The

Chicago fans, as nasty as they might sometimes be, did not rush out onto the field and string him up, or throw him into prison. But, over the course of history, such terrible things have happened to the God's people—and it wasn't just their unlucky day. As hard as it may be for us to comprehend, God's hand was often at work when these awful things happened. Let me give you just a few quick examples.

Go back about 3,500 years to a time when the Egyptian kingdom along the Nile River was one of the most powerful in the world. And in that kingdom was a high and mighty official named Potiphar who was one of Pharaoh's main captains. He had placed a great deal of trust in a young Hebrew man named Joseph, who pretty much ran Potiphar's household. Joseph was a handsome young man and Potiphar's wife was quite taken by what she could see. But, she had roaming eyes and wanted to see even more, so she made advances to Joseph in an attempt to lure him to her bed.³ When Joseph refused her sexual advances, she lied and falsely accused him of forcing himself upon her. And so, there was Joseph—on top of the world one day, but the next day found himself tossed into Potiphar's dungeon. Like the hand of an Eagle defensive lineman, Mrs. Potiphar's hand had tipped the ball—only this time it wasn't a football plunking against a goal post, but Joseph being plunked onto the cold hard floor of a prison cell. And if

Potiphar's wife had taunted him for his fall from her husband's grace, what do you think Joseph's response would have been to her? I am certain what it would have been. It would have been exactly what he would later tell his brothers—the ones who had sold him into slavery. Joseph would have pointed to heaven like a godly field goal kicker who missed his kick, and would have proclaimed with boldness: "It was God who sent me here, not you!"⁴ You see, Joseph knew that it wasn't luckiness or unluckiness, it wasn't even the wicked hand of Potiphar's wife who tipped the ball. Rather, Joseph knew that it was the Hand of God. God was the One who had arranged the circumstances in a manner that Joseph ended up in that dungeon. Why?—Why on earth would God do such a thing? Well, the answer is simply this: Because it was part of God's Plan—the plan whereby Joseph, if he remained faithful, would be called from that very dungeon and into the presence of Pharaoh to interpret his dreams. And Joseph was faithful to God, and because of that he eventually rose to be the head administrator of the entire Egyptian kingdom. And from that position, God used Joseph to preserve the entirety of the Hebrew people who fled to Egypt during a time of famine. Without God arranging things in that manner, the Hebrews would have had no benefactor in Egypt to plead their case and, in all likelihood, would have died as a race from starvation. The

line of David would have prematurely ended long before a holy child was born in Bethlehem who would be the Savior of the world. And, now we can see that God had a plan for Joseph—it just so happened that part of that plan made his stay in that dungeon a necessity. And so, his prison stay did serve a purpose—two purposes, in fact: It tested and strengthened Joseph’s faith, and saved God’s people in the process.

Or, take the examples of Daniel, as well as that of his friends—Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. Centuries after Joseph’s time, the kings of Babylon ruled over one of the most dominant and decadent empires the world has ever known. It was the Babylonian empire. On two separate occasions, these kings issued decrees that were designed to force the Jewish people, who were in captivity in Babylon, to bow down to a pagan god. In Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego’s case, they had been ordered by King Nebuchadnezzar to bow down and worship a gold statue. Later, on another occasion—this one involving Daniel—King Darius actually ordered everyone to bow down to him as if he were god. In both instances, these pagan kings were sorely disappointed. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refused to bow down to a pagan statute made of gold, and were prepared to suffer the consequences.⁵ Similarly, Daniel refused to worship anyone but the

true God of Israel, no matter what happened. And again, that Hand reached out and tipped the ball.

It tipped Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego into a fiery furnace, and it appeared that they would be toast—quite literally. And in Daniel’s case, it tipped him into the lions’ den—and believe me it wasn’t the Detroit Lions. No, these were real lions, and Daniel was at the top of the menu for their next meal.

So, once again, we can ask ourselves if they were just plain unlucky?—were they just experiencing a little bad karma? Or, this hand that tipped the ball, was it something else—was it the Hand of God at work here. . .? *Indeed, it was!* In Daniel’s case, an angel shut the mouths of those lions mouth as tightly as the spiral of a quarterback’s pass. And not a hair on the heads of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were even singed. They trusted God and He saved them. And, they then rose to be great government leaders, even in this foreign land. As a result, a remnant of the Jewish people took heart, and retained hope and faith in God. And without these remarkable displays of faith by these four young men, the Jewish faith may well have died out in this ungodly, pagan land—and that line of descent leading to Christ could have faded from the scene.

Turning to the New Testament, consider Stephen—the first martyr of the early Christian Church. He was a bold witness for Christ and spread the Gospel that Jesus had come as the Son of God. But, the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem despised the Good News that Stephen bore, and so they arrested him. That didn't deter Stephen one little bit. He continued, in their very presence, to proclaim his message and pointed out that these Jewish leaders had missed the boat when it came to the Messiah. Acts 7 tells us: ⁵⁴ The Jewish leaders were infuriated by Stephen's accusation, and they shook their fists at him in rage. ⁵⁵ But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed steadily into heaven and saw the glory of God, and he saw Jesus standing in the place of honor at God's right hand. ⁵⁶ And he told them, "Look, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing in the place of honor at God's right hand!" ⁵⁷ Then they put their hands over their ears and began shouting. They rushed at him ⁵⁸ and dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. His accusers took off their coats and laid them at the feet of a young man named Saul. ⁵⁹ As they stoned him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." ⁶⁰ He fell to his knees, shouting, "Lord, don't charge them with this sin!" And with that, he died.

Did you notice what it says that Stephen did even while his captors shook their fists at him in rage? His circumstances were far more grave

than having just lost a football game—yet, he looked up to Heaven, just the same. He wasn't distracted by their rantings against him. Rather, he focused on Jesus—even when things reached their lowest point and all those stones came crashing upon him, stealing his life away. And now, almost 2,000 years later, we still remember this great display of courage, worship and faith.

So what does all of this teach us?—these missed field goals, trips into fiery furnaces, descents into lion-infested pits, and those times when deadly stones might be hurled our way? I think that the answer is simply this: Sometimes when you miss those field goals, you can actually be scoring the most points for God. And, it teaches us that God keeps score in a very different way than the world does. And, those times that we are subjected to the worst of things, yet still point to Heaven and praise God—those acts of worship and praise may actually provide the greatest testimony of all to an unbelieving world. You see, in God's way of score-keeping, he doesn't count points by field goals, touch-downs, homeruns, three-pointers or foul shots. He doesn't even count dollars in a person's bank account, the size of their homes or the fancy kind of cars that they may drive. God doesn't keep score like that way at all. Rather, He counts something else.

He counts crosses. He counts the crosses that you bear. And more importantly, God observes the manner in which you bear those crosses. Now, listen very closely—that is not to say that you can score points with God. You *can't* score *any* points with God. Why?—because all of your points were scored by Jesus on the most painful Cross of all. So, what is it that God is looking for when you are carrying your crosses?—when you are the one who misses the chip-shot field goal, or is sitting in the lions' den? It is then that God is looking closely. He is searching your soul. And, what is He looking for? It is this: **FAITH!**—God is looking for faith—faith that you trust in Him to see you through?

But, what about Stephen, someone might say: “He died a terrible death from the blows of those stones—God didn't see him through”—*they might claim*. But yes, God did see Stephen through—for right after that last breath he took on this earth, the next breath Stephen took was there in Heaven, in the presence of Almighty God. Stephen was faithful to God on this earth, and God was faith in bringing him into His Heavenly Kingdom—as He is faithful to all who point to the sky and praise Him—even in the worst of times.

Now, I suspect that years from now, hardly anyone will remember any of these play-off games, including the Bears and Eagles game. But, there will be those who will remember a lonely place kicker named

Cody Parkey who, despite the most crushing missed kick of his career, had the faith and trust to point to God in a tribute of praise. Whether Cody continues on in the N.F.L. or not, I don't know. But, I do know this: It is not the owner of the Chicago Bears who will decide that, because Cody plays for a far Greater Owner—One that doesn't trade players, but puts them in His own Heavenly Hall of Fame. And, because of that, I know that God has wonderful plans for Cody, just like He had for Joseph, Daniel and his friends, and Stephen. And, when we trust in Him and praise His name—in good times, and especially during the bad ones—well then, you will serve the plan that He has for you. And in that case—never mind looking toward any earthly scoreboard—for in the eyes of God, you will always be a winner if you will just trust in Him.

Let us pray.

Men's Christian Breakfast
@ Ragland Memorial Baptist Church
January 19, 2019

Forest Hill Baptist Church
January 20, 2019
Darvin Satterwhite, Pastor
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¹ Michael Foust, "Chicago Bears Kicker Cody Parkey Misses Game Winning Field Goal, Praises God Anyway," ChristianHeadlines.com, January 7, 2019.

² Rick Morrissey, "The clang's all here: Bears kicker Cody Parkey hits four uprights. No, really," chicago.suntimes.com, 11-11-18.

³ Genesis 39:6-7 (NLT2) ⁶ So Potiphar gave Joseph complete administrative responsibility over everything he owned. With Joseph there, he didn't worry about a thing—except what kind of food to eat! Joseph was a very handsome and well-built young man, ⁷ and Potiphar's wife soon began to look at him lustfully. "Come and sleep with me," she demanded.

⁴ Genesis 45:8 (NLT2) ⁸ So it was God who sent me here, not you! And he is the one who made me an adviser to Pharaoh—the manager of his entire palace and the governor of all Egypt.

⁵ Daniel 3:16-18 (NLT2) ¹⁶ Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego replied, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you. ¹⁷ If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God whom we serve is able to save us. He will rescue us from your power, Your Majesty. ¹⁸ But even if he doesn't, we want to make it clear to you, Your Majesty, that we will never serve your gods or worship the gold statue you have set up."