

February 3, 2008

***The Game of Your Life***

Hebrews 9:27-28

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Jill and I had a great time with around 16,000 or so Baptists at the New Baptist Covenant Gathering in Atlanta this last week from Wednesday to Saturday. We got home last night so we will tell you more about that next week when we've had more time to reflect and prepare. It was an inspiring, challenging, and encouraging event to attend and I look forward to sharing with you about our experience.

Today is one of the biggest national celebrations in the United States each year. It is Super Bowl Sunday, a day of football, money, excess, food and more. Businesses will spend millions of dollars for 60 second commercials. In Arizona during the week before the game if you wanted to you could spend hundreds of dollars to go to parties with so-called celebrities whose contribution to the betterment of society is sometimes hard to discern.

On television and radio, in print and on line thousands upon thousands of hours have been spent in producing stories and finding every possible angle from the sublime to the ridiculous about some aspect of the game, the teams, the players, the coaches, and the fans. Billions of dollars will be bet not just on the outcome of the game but more things than you can imagine including things like who will win the opening coin toss, whether the first missed field goal goes left or right, or if the number of the last person to score is odd or even. You all know I like sports as much as the next guy, and I am looking forward to finally watching the game tonight, and I really hope the Patriots win big and make history by going 19-0. However, while the Super Bowl is big business it is also just a game; a game which should be a diversion from the pain, stress and work of every day life. **It is not to be our life.**

But since it is Super Bowl Sunday and whether we are sports fans or not we can't escape the game, I want to talk with you this morning about a game that is even more important and that is **the game of your life**, which is, in many ways, a lot like a football game.

The first way life is like a football game is that there is a clock, time is limited as the Bible teaches us. We only get so many years and we only get one life and we need to make the most of our one and only life. Listen to these words from

**Psalm 90:10-12**

**"The days of our life are seventy years,**

**or perhaps eighty, if we are strong;  
even then their span is only toil and trouble;  
they are soon gone, and we fly away.**

Who considers the power of your anger?

Your wrath is as great as the fear that is due you.

**So teach us to count our days  
that we may gain a wise heart.”**

Hebrews 9:27-28 “And just as it is appointed for mortals **to die once, and after that the judgment**, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, **but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.”**

None of us knows how long we will live, but if we are healthy, strong, and fortunate, Psalm 90 says we can hope for 80 years. If so you can easily figure what quarter of your life are you in. If our life span is 80 years – 1-20 years old is the first quarter, 21-40 second quarter, 41-60 Third quarter 61-80 Fourth quarter, 81 + Overtime or Bonus Time. However, as we all know, life holds no guarantees for how long we may live so we need to seize our opportunity at life and make the most of it. Psalm 90 says, **“So teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart.”**

We are never too young to begin thinking about what God may want us to do with our life. And God is an important part of the equation, it is not just what do I want to do, but what does God want me to do with my life. What strengths, talents, abilities, and skills have we been given? What are we passionate about? What can I do to leave the world better than we found it for future generations? How can we serve God in our time by being a blessing to other people? The sooner we learn that a significant life invested answering these questions is better and more satisfying than a life chasing after an illusion of success that is all about us and our comfort the better off we will be.

A football team knows it will only possess the ball so many times in a game so it is important to make the most of those offensive opportunities. The path to a significant life also includes a wise heart that understands the importance of time. It also includes faith and determination in pursuing our dreams and goals when some people may tell us “No, you’re not good enough to do that.” Those of us who are older – who are parents

and grandparents, have a special role to play in encouraging our children and grandchildren to pursue the dreams God gives them.

**Wes Welker** a wide receiver on the Patriots– is a little guy, only about 5' 9" and 180 pounds. He grew up in a strong Christian home in Oklahoma and starred at his high school but when it came to college nobody wanted him. He was rejected for a college scholarship by 104 colleges and universities because he was considered too small and too slow, but **Wes is an example of the power of faith, determination, perseverance and hard work.** Nine years after college football shunned him until he finally talked himself into Texas Tech where he immediately became a star; four years after not being invited to the NFL combine to show his skills for NFL teams, then going undrafted by any team, Welker made the San Diego Chargers as a free agent only to be cut after the first game. Now Welker is a mega star headed for the Super Bowl with New England. He is a perfect fit, finally, in a world that measures itself with tapes, scales and 40-yard dashes. He caught 112 passes this season, an NFL record for a player in his first season with a new team and he is a big reason the Patriots are 18-0 and flirting with NFL history. **And none of it would have happened if Welker had accepted one no.**

**"We tried to teach that, to run after your dreams, don't let people tell you no,"** His mother Shelley says. *"That's why it's such a great story. When one door would close, another one would open. It was all part of God's plan, and we know that,"* Shelley says. *"It worked out just like it was supposed to."<sup>1</sup>* In our life it is especially important to keep pursuing our dreams with faith and determination to overcome the obstacles that inevitably come our way.

At half time of the Superbowl, we are usually subjected to some schlocky entertainment and even more commercials, but for the coaches and teams, halftime is a brief period of rest, reflection, analysis, and adjustments that are made to correct mistakes. In our lives as well we need to keep learning from our mistakes and making adjustments. Patriots Coach Bill Belichick is a good example of this.

**Bill Belichick – learning from our mistakes and making adjustments.**

So much of who and what Belichick is today as head coach of the successful New England Patriots can be traced to who and what he was as head coach of the mostly unsuccessful Browns. There are such stark differences between the two tenures, and

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<sup>1</sup> **January 28, 2008** Once a role player, Patriots' Wes Welker now a budding star by *Elizabeth Merrill, senior writer for ESPN.com.*

yet Belichick remains essentially the same person, just not entirely the same coach.

*"The Browns were his training camp, his boot camp for success,"* said Mary Kay Cabot, the beat reporter who covered Belichick and the Browns for the Cleveland Plain Dealer.

*"There were mistakes he made here on players, personnel, staff, public relations. But he's the master of adjustments. He learned how to do it right by everything he did wrong here."*

Nearly 12 years ago, when Modell took only a few minutes to fire Belichick over the phone, the decision was hailed as necessary and inevitable. An Akron columnist pithily wrote, "Bill Belichick's five-year reign of error is over."

In 2000, a new reign began with the Patriots. This time the errors can be counted on a pair of mittens. During his eight seasons as New England's coach, Belichick's Patriots have won three Super Bowls, are at the brink of a fourth and can become the first NFL team to finish 19-0. If his team beats the New York Giants, you can argue that Belichick might be the greatest NFL coach of all time. In Cleveland, he was 37-45 with one playoff win (over the Patriots). In New England, he is 105-39 with 14 playoff victories.

*"We all learn from our mistakes,"* said Ernie Accorsi, the former Browns executive VP for football operations who hired the 38-year-old Belichick as head coach in 1991. Belichick can coach. But he coaches better since he left Cleveland. He coaches better because he got fired and *had* to adjust.<sup>2</sup>

One of the mistaken assumptions some folks have is that people who are successful never fail, or mess up or make mistakes. Far from it, what is more correlated to being successful and significant is learning from our mistakes and making appropriate adjustments. It is like the old saying, "Fool me once, shame on you, fool me twice, shame on me." We need to learn and adjust as we go through life because our time is precious and limited.

To succeed in the game of life – requires having faith, working hard, and persevering through "no's" and obstacles, like Wes Welker. To have a significant life

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<sup>2</sup> To understand Belichick, look what he did with Browns, By Gene Wojciechowski, ESPN.com

demands learning from our failures and mistakes and making adjustments like Bill Belichick.

In a football game, unlike life, we know when we enter the Third and Fourth Quarter that we're getting to crunch time, the clock is ticking down, time is running out, the choices, decisions and actions we make are critical as we seek to fulfill God's mission and purpose for our life. God is the creator and giver of our life and God has given us a calling, a mission, a destiny to pursue.

**Benjamin Watson – your job and your mission.** Last week Jackie MacMullan wrote a story in The Boston Globe about Patriots tight end Benjamin Watson titled *A Patriot Answers Two Callings – Watson Offers a Spiritual Example*. "When Benjamin Watson was barely 4 years old, already having mastered the proper technique for a three-point football stance, he tugged earnestly at his father's sleeve. "Dad," he said. "Can you put me in the closet?" "Why, son? Why should I do that?" his father, pastor Ken Watson, responded. "So you can announce my name," Benjamin answered. "So I can run onto the football field." And so began a family ritual. Young Benjamin, crammed in with the coats, would patiently wait as his father declared in a booming voice, "Now, starting at running back for the Washington Redskins, No. 45, Benjamin Watson . . ." At that moment, the boy would bust out, arms raised, eyes fixed straight ahead on the dream in front of him. "Ever since I can remember," said Ken Watson, "if you asked Benjamin what he wanted to be when he grew up, he'd answer, 'I want to be a football player and a missionary.'"

Twenty-three years later, Patriots tight end Benjamin Watson is an NFL starter, an integral part of an unbeaten team that will try to cap its perfect season with a victory over the New York Giants in Super Bowl XLII in Glendale, Ariz.

Watson's career is approaching its zenith, yet as he has established himself as a respected member of the Patriots, he simultaneously has answered the call of his faith. Last week, while his teammates enjoyed a three-day hiatus from football, Watson formally kicked off his "One More" Foundation, created to promote educational and enrichment opportunities through charitable programs.

"So much of football relates to Christian life - sacrifice, commitment, discipline," said Watson. "I know God has a plan for me. I don't know what it is. After football? Who

*knows? My grandmother and my father always said I would end up as a missionary. Well, I feel like I am one now."*

The genesis of that calling came when he was a child in Rock Hill, S.C., as he engaged in bedtime talks with his mother, Diana, about her beliefs.

*"He'd ask me spiritual questions he wouldn't ask when the light was on," Diana Watson said. "Questions about Jesus, about sins, about heaven. He was very inquisitive. He was looking for answers."*

Because his dad was a pastor, Watson and his five siblings spent each summer tagging along to Christian camps. Benjamin found himself transfixed by the words of his father, whom he admired fervently. Once, after the family returned from a retreat with the Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA), Benjamin's friends came over to toss a football. Instead, they were given a sermon by a solemn 7-year-old intent on spreading the word of God.

*"The kids were all sitting on the curb, listening to Benjamin talk," Ken Watson said. "He was telling them how important it was to give your life to the Lord. I was like, 'Wow.'"*

As Watson grew older and excelled in football, his father reminded him to praise God in the midst of his failures as well as his successes.

*"I told him his love for God should be the same when he was dropping the ball as when he was catching a touchdown," Ken Watson said.*

Faith is not something to turn on and off like a faucet, although many athletes have been criticized for doing just that. The reason some people have an aversion to athletes who publicly praise Christ, Ken Watson said, is that occasionally the athletes come off as inconsistent, even hypocritical.

*"I think when people see athletes being very demonstrative on the field about their relationship with God, they also want to see what they do once the game is over," he explained. "If you are pointing your finger to the sky and praising the Lord after you score*

*a touchdown, then you get off the field and you're a bum, well, who is going to believe in you?"<sup>3</sup>*

Benjamin Watson understands the importance of giving his life to Jesus and serving others. As Pastor Ken Watson observed, some people look up to professional athletes because they are famous or wealthy, but neither fame nor money guarantees joy or contentment. Ken Blanchard, best known for the business classic, *The One Minute Manager* has said, *"Many people measure their success by wealth, recognition, power, and status. There's nothing wrong with those, but if that's all you're focused on you're missing the boat. **Using your time and talents to serve others-that's when truly meaningful success can come your way.**"*

Some of us are much closer to the end of our life on earth than the beginning. In football terms we may be in the final two minutes or in Overtime. In a football game at those times everyone's sense of awareness heightened, you savor each moment, and you persevere through pain and exhaustion because you know you are almost done and victory is within sight. The Patriots have two players who are very close to the end of their football playing lives.

**Linebacker Junior Seau** was retired when Coach Belichick called him and told him there was a place for him in New England. He came back, played a key role, and then broke his arm in a game last season, he could have quit, given up his dream of winning a Super Bowl which he has never done in his long, Hall of Fame career, but he worked out diligently and came back for one more try.

**Linebacker Teddy Bruschi** – had a life threatening stroke a couple years ago, and has come all the way back to play again at a championship level. One of the tough things about being in the fourth quarter of life is we are more likely to run into physical challenges that must be faced, overcome, or accepted, but that doesn't mean God no longer has a role for us to play in serving and encouraging and praying for others.

Whatever quarter of life in which we find our self; and none of us knows for sure; it is not too late to invest our life, our time, our energy in serving others and finding true success and significance. Whatever time we have begins today and tomorrow and so that is where we put our focus.

The author George Bernard Shaw in one of his best quotes wrote:

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<sup>3</sup> Jackie MacMullan, A Patriot Answers Two Callings, The Boston Globe, January 28, 2008

**“This is the one true joy in life, the being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one; the being a force of nature instead of a feverish, selfish little clod of ailments and grievances, complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy. ....**

**I am of the opinion that my life belongs to the whole community and as long as I live it is my privilege to do for it whatever I can. ....**

**I want to be thoroughly used up when I die, for the harder I work, the more I live. I rejoice in life for its own sake. Life is no `brief candle' to me. It is a sort of splendid torch which I have got hold of for the moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations.”<sup>4</sup>**

In Deuteronomy 30:19-20 (NASB), God tells us,

**“Choose life in order that you may live...by loving the Lord your God, by obeying His voice, and by holding fast to him; for this is your life and the length of your days.”**

Prayer: **So teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart.**

Blessing: “The time for my departure is near. I have fought the good fight,

I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.

Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award me on that day - and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.

The Lord will rescue me...and bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom.

To him be glory forever and ever.

The Lord be with your spirit. Grace be with you all. Amen.

2 Timothy 4:6-8, 18, 22

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<sup>4</sup> George Bernard Shaw, partly from the 'Dedicatory Letter' in Man and Superman