

## **A True Underdog Story**

### **Ephesians 2: 1- 5**

Since as far back as can remember, I've been an avid sports fan, both playing and watching sports. This is probably due to my child-like reasoning that throwing a baseball or shooting a basketball would be a heck of a lot more fun than mucking out calf pens or worse yet, the chicken coop!

Like most young aspiring athletes, I dreamed of the chance to make the final shot at the buzzer to lift my team to victory.

I'd be on the basketball court on the farm and begin counting down: 5, 4, 3, 2 .... And let fly a shot from long range. If I made it – which I almost always did - I'd imagine my teammates carrying me off the court with cheers of adoring fans ringing in my ears. I had a vivid imagination!

As Americans, we love great underdog stories.

We take pleasure in the underdog finally getting his day in the sun. Whether it's Joe Namath and the Jets upsetting the Baltimore Colts – way before they became the Indianapolis Colts – or a small college football team like Boise State knocking off perennial powerhouse Oklahoma on New Years Day, we just can't get enough of the little dog jumping up and stealing the big dog's bone.

Remember the movie, Hoosiers?

It's based on a true story that took place back in 1954 when a small school from Milan, Indiana beat a much larger school from Muncie to win the Indiana State Basketball championship, 32 – 30.

To this day, it's still considered the greatest basketball game in Indiana history, when this tiny school beat the large school.

Games like this rarely happen anymore, because back then there was only one division to compete in.

Now there are four or five divisions based the school's enrollment size. Even if you're not a sports fan, you'll enjoy this movie about "Hoosier Hysteria."

The Bible is full of underdog stories, and we love to remember them because they inspire us and stir within us hope and fuel perseverance.

Think about Noah who was called to build an incredibly large ark. He only had himself and his three sons to help with the construction. Maybe the elephants helped too, I'm not sure.

My guess is that he didn't get much help from the neighbors who pretty much thought he'd lost his mind and gone mad. More and more people today think Christians have lost their minds as they watch us following an Ancient God and a belief system, they consider to be archaic, out-of-date, and irrelevant.

Build an ark to house all the different species of animals because God is going to judge the world by sending a flood? By worldly standards, this sounds so preposterous, but that's exactly what happened.

When the ark was finished and all the animals were safely on board, the rain began to fall from the heavens and "*all the springs of the great deep burst forth*". Then God shut the ark's door with Noah and his family safely inside.

God's judgement is sure to happen again, but this time flood waters will not be God's instrument of justice. It will be his unbearable and awesome holiness which cannot tolerate sin, and unless we seek refuge in God's Grace by believing in His Son and his sacrificial act on the cross, we will not escape.

In the book of Revelation, John the Apostle asks, *"For the great day of their wrath [speaking of God and his Son] has come, and who can stand?"* In other words, who can endure it?

The prophet Zephaniah warns us, *"Seek the Lord, all you humble of the land, you who do what he commands. Seek righteousness, seek humility; perhaps you will be sheltered on the day of the Lord's anger."*

In other words, our only hope of salvation is claiming God's righteousness as our own, and the Apostle Paul makes clear how this can happen. In Romans 1:17, the Apostle Paul writes, *"For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: 'The righteous will live by faith.'"*

And two chapters later, he writes *"But now a righteousness from God, apart from the law, has been made known, to which the prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe."*

God protected Noah and his family from his wrath by sealing the door of the ark behind them and securing their future. We will be protected by God's coming wrath by having our hearts sealed with the Holy Spirit that comes the moment we believe in Jesus's righteous life and work at the cross to save us from our sins.

Noah's story is a true underdog story, and it can be ours too.

Here's another true underdog story: Abraham and Sarah – a couple well along in years without the prospect of an heir. The Bible tells us that Sarah was 90 and Abraham 100 when Sarah finally gave birth to their son Isaac.

When I go to heaven, I'm going to ask Sarah how she survived those 3am feedings!

And this underdog story only gets more fascinating: When Isaac hits his teenage years, God commands his father to sacrifice his son as a burnt offering! (Parents of teenagers, don't get any ideas!) But imagine this:

Think about the most precious person in your life – how much that person means to you, and how much hurt you feel when you see your loved one in pain. Taking that person's life seems beyond inconceivable, and yet that's exactly what God called Abraham to do.

In the end though, we see how God spared Isaac's life by supplying a ram trapped in a nearby thicket just in the nick of time. It wasn't until Abraham raised his knife that the angel of the Lord called out:

*"Abraham, do not harm your son!"*

Talk about a buzzer beater!

Some people, after hearing this story, might be tempted to view God as a mean, sadistic God who enjoys playing with people's emotions, and I admit this thought has crossed my mind, but in this story it's Abraham's faith that counts, but not any faith. It's the object of his faith that makes all the difference.

And we get a glimpse of who Abraham believed in long before he reached the place of sacrifice: In Genesis 22:5, He tells his servants who accompanied him on his journey: *"Wait here. We will worship and then we'll come back to you."*

The author of Hebrews comments on this great event writing ...

*"By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had received the promises concerning his having descendants as numerous as the stars and as countless as the sand on the seashore, reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from the dead."*

Do you reason and believe in a God who can make something out of nothing ...

who can redeem evil for good ...

and bring life from death?

If you don't, you don't believe in the Biblical God and you don't believe in the underdog's story which is also a Christian's story and testimony.

Paul writes in Romans 5, *"You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly ... God demonstrated his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."*

Then there's the account of Joseph, Jacob's favorite son who, at a young and tender age was betrayed by his own flesh and blood.

Because of their unbridled jealousy, his brothers sold him to slavery. Later on, while serving a prison sentence for crimes he didn't commit, he interprets the royal cupbearer's dream, and it looks like his get out of jail card is going to work. But even as the cupbearer is restored to his position as Joseph predicted, he was forgotten for two more years!

For a teenager, two years seems like an eternity – two years can be an entire professional sports career.

Two years of feeling forgotten and betrayed is plenty of time to let bitterness and resentment take root and flourish in one's life.

But God kept Joseph's heart pure and tender so that when his time final came to interpret the Pharaoh's, Joseph was up for the task to honor his God.

It's the quintessential underdog story and the beauty of it is that in *his* moment of glory, he does what we so often forget to do – give all the credit to God. *"I cannot interpret your dream, but God can."*

Of course, there are other famous underdog stories.

There's the story of the shepherd boy David who topples Goliath.

Gideon who greatly feared and doubted, but in the end, defeated the vast Midianite army with a mere 300 men.

Ezra and Nehemiah persevered in rebuilding the temple and the walls of Jerusalem despite severe opposition.

And how can we forget Elijah who took on all the priests of Baal?

And do you know the common thread that ties all these stories together – these terrific underdog stories?

God showed up. God saved the day.

It was God's work, not man's that tipped the scale and brought home the victory.

It was God, Creator of all things who brought the animals into the ark on a bright, warm, and sunny day.

It was God, the Promise – keeper who brought Isaac into existence even though his parents far were beyond their child-bearing years.

It was Jehovah Jireh who provided the ram in the thicket so Abram's son could be spared.

It was God who gave Pharaoh his dream and Joseph the interpretation so that he would be instrumental in preserving the young and fragile nation called Israel.

The God is going to help you with your need as well.

Maybe you're struggling with finances, health, or family situations.

God can help.

Maybe you need help raising your children or your health is declining, and your future is uncertain.

Well, in these moments of crisis, God is going to show up, because God loves underdogs and he pulls for the underdog.

How do I know?

Because the Bible tells me so. This is what Ephesians 2: 1- 5 is all about. In verse 1 Paul writes, *“As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins in which you used to live.”*

There it is.

The beginning of our underdog story. It’s as plain as the nose on our face.

We’re in a world of hurt, and we need God to show up.

We need divine intervention.

And what’s really interesting about this verse is that Paul says that dead people live! *“You were dead in your transgressions and sins in which you used to live.”*

I had a teaching colleague that once gave me a nugget of truth. He said, “Be on the lookout for children walking around in adult bodies.” He meant that physical maturity doesn’t necessarily equate to emotional or spiritual maturity.

Well, here’s another saying he’d probably agree with:

“Be on the lookout for dead people walking around.” In other words, people who are physically alive, but spiritually dead.

Jesus described the Pharisees like this, once calling them whitewashed tombs. From all outward appearances they seemed alive, but on the inside their souls were dead.

The Pharisees were more interested in performing self-righteous acts than pursuing God's righteousness.

To put it bluntly, many people we interact with everyday are suffering from the same condition and may not even realize it or at least won't admit it.

And even if they do admit to it, do they now how to change their spiritual condition?

We need to help them.

How can we help?

Well, by first recognizing their spiritual condition and understanding the implications of their condition – separation from God for all eternity – the consequences brought upon by ourselves for not believing in God.

If we don't see non-believers in this light – that they are under God's judgment – then we're not viewing them as God sees them.

Does God love these people? Of course!

More than we will ever know, but God's love doesn't change us until we accept it and trust in it and believe in it in the form of Christ's sacrifice on the cross.

Until this happens, we remain the objects of God's wrath. We need a changed nature and a changed status. We must go from dead in our trespasses and sins to alive in Christ.

My mom tells the story of the day I was born:

The nurse looked at me and the first thing she said was that I was destined to be a baseball pitcher because of how long my arms were. And sure enough, I did pitch.

I guess it was in my nature, but another part of my nature from birth was that I was sinner, as everyone is except God's Son Jesus.

So, sin isn't just an act of disobedience or neglecting to do something good.

Sin is a state of being that needs to be changed and transformed, because until it is, we remain children of wrath and destined for God's holy punishment.

When I think of God's wrath, I think of God's slow-burning anger against all that is unholy – an anger that can flare up at any given moment.

It's only God's patience, mercy, forbearance and loving-kindness that holds back, at least for a time, his righteous judgment we all deserve.

Our only escape is to hide in the shadow of his grace.

Many will argue, If God is love, how can he also be angry?

I find that parents are the best at answering this question:

Any parent who is worth their salt gets angry when they witness or observe 2 things:

Someone or something harming their own flesh and blood, and their own children harming themselves.

When this happens, parents get angry and so does God.

When God sees his good and perfect creation being messed up by the *"spirit who is at work in those who are disobedient"* how could he not get angry?

Perhaps this is why sins are called trespasses.

As sinners, we walk all over God's property without acknowledging him or giving him the respect and honor due his name.

In athletic competitions, coaches will sometimes tell players to channel their anger or focus their anger on their opponent.

We were God's opponent until we came to Christ.

But God, in a surprising and unexpected way, momentarily focused his anger – his wrath on his Son so that we might live again!

Jesus bore his Father's wrath which we deserved so that we could be spared eternal judgement.

He rescued us and delivered us precisely at the moment of our greatest need.

We were dead in our trespasses and sins, but God, being rich in mercy made us alive in Christ.

When we put our faith in Christ, the Bible tells us that we are a new creation. The old is gone, the new has come.

We are no longer children of wrath but children of the living God.

Can anyone think of a better underdog story? I can't.

There's an old cliché in sports lingo that says football or baseball or basketball is a game of inches:

A pitch just off the edge of the plate could be called a ball or a strike.

A toe on the three-point line can be the difference between winning and losing.

Someone once said that faith in Christ is a matter of inches.

We may know the gospel intellectually, but has it found a home in our hearts?

Those few inches between head and heart can make all the difference in the world.

While on the cross, Christ could have called a legion of angels to rescue him, and the scoffers at the foot of the cross ridiculed him saying he saved others but couldn't save himself.

He chose not to save himself, so that we, the underdogs could be saved, to be set free, to eventually be unburdened from our sin, and to have a joyous future with him.

When will we ever understand this?

Here's another sports cliché:

Leave everything out there on the field.

Give 110%.

Play every second as if it is your last.

Well, I hate to break it to you, but we can't do any of these things.

Only God can and has.

Jesus left heaven and went to Calvary so that you and me, the most extreme underdogs of all time could share in Christ's victory.

Paul writes this near the end of I Corinthians. It's the perfect benediction to close my message: *"Thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."*

I don't know about you, but when the final buzzer sounds, I'll be riding out on Christ's shoulders, on His mercy and love and forgiveness – on his effort, not mine. I hope you will too. Amen.