



The Winner

Thoughts on a soccer game

I was watching some little kids play soccer. These kids were only five or six years old, but they were playing a real game, a serious game. Two teams, complete with coaches, uniforms, and parents. I didn't know any of them, so I was able to enjoy the game without the distraction of being anxious about winning or losing; I only wished the parents and coaches could have done the same. The teams were pretty evenly matched. I will just call them Team One and Team Two.

Nobody scored in the first period. The kids were hilarious. They were clumsy and earnest as only children can be. They fell over their own feet, stumbled over the ball, kicked at the ball and missed it, but they didn't seem to care.—They were having fun!

In the second period, the Team One coach pulled out what must have been his first team players and put in the scrubs, with the exception of his best player, who he left at goalie. The game took a dramatic turn. I guess winning is important even when you are five years old, because the Team Two coach

left his best players in, and the Team One scrubs were just no match for them.

Team Two swarmed around the little guy at goalie. He was an outstanding athlete for five, but he was no match for three or four who were equally as good. Team Two began to score.

The lone goalie gave it his all, recklessly throwing his body in front of incoming balls, trying valiantly to stop them. Team Two scored two quick points in succession. It infuriated the young boy. He became a raging maniac, shouting, running, and diving. With all the stamina he could muster, he finally was able to cover one of the boys as he approached the goal. But that boy kicked the ball to another boy twenty feet away, and by the time the young goalie repositioned himself, it was too late. They scored a third goal.

I soon learned who the goalie's parents were. They were nice, decent-looking people. I could tell that his dad had just come from the office, tie and all. They yelled encouragement to their son. I became totally absorbed,

watching the boy on the field and his parents on the sideline. After the third goal the little kid changed. He could see it was no use; he couldn't stop them. He didn't quit, but he became quietly desperate. Futility was written all over his face.

His father changed too. He had been urging his son to try harder, yelling advice and encouragement. But then he changed; he became anxious. He tried to say that it was okay to hang in there. He grieved for the pain his son was feeling.

After the fourth goal, I knew what was going to happen. I've seen it before. The little boy needed help so badly, and there was no help to be had. He retrieved the ball from the net and handed it to the referee, and then he cried. He just stood there while huge tears rolled down both cheeks. He went to his knees, and then I saw his father start onto the field. His wife clutched his wrist and said, "Jim, don't. You'll embarrass him."

But the boy's father tore loose from her and ran onto the field. He wasn't supposed to, for the game was still in

progress. Suit, tie, dress shoes and all, he charged onto the field and he picked up his son so everybody would know that this was his boy. And he hugged him and kissed him and cried with him! I have never been so proud of any man in my life.



He carried him off the field, and when they got close to the sidelines I heard him say, "Son, I'm so proud of you. You were great out there. I want everybody to know that you are my son."

"Daddy," the boy sobbed, "I couldn't stop them. I tried, Daddy, I tried and tried and they scored on me."

"Scotty, it doesn't matter how many times they score

on you. You're my son, and I'm proud of you. I want you to go back out there and finish the game. I know you want to quit, but you can't. And son, you're going to get scored on again, but it doesn't matter. Go on, now."

It made a difference.—I could tell it did. When you're all alone, you're getting scored on, and you can't stop them, it means a lot to know that it doesn't matter to those who love you. The little guy ran back on to the field. Team Two scored two more times, but it was okay.

I get scored on every day. I try so hard. I recklessly throw my body in every direction. I fume and rage. I struggle with every ounce of my being. The tears come, and I go to my knees, helpless. And my heavenly Father rushes right out on the field, right in front of the whole crowd, the whole jeering, laughing world, and He picks me up.

He hugs me and says, "I am so proud of you! You were great out there. I want everybody to know that you are My child. And because I control the outcome of the game I declare you the *winner!*"

—*Author unknown*

Who then can ever keep Christ's love from us? When we have trouble or calamity, when we are hunted down or destroyed, is it because He doesn't love us anymore? And if we are hungry or penniless or in danger or threatened with death, has God deserted us? No, despite all this, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ who loved us enough to die for us. For I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from His love. Death can't, and life can't. The angels won't, and all the powers of hell itself cannot keep God's love away. Our fears for today, our worries about tomorrow, or where we are—high above the sky, or in the deepest ocean—nothing will ever be able to separate us from the love of God demonstrated by our Lord Jesus Christ when He died for us.

—*The Bible, Romans 8:35, 37–39 TLB*