

THE RIGHT WAY TO WAIT

Scriptures: Mark 13:1-13, 24-37

One of the most exciting football games I have ever watched was last year's Fiesta Bowl between Oklahoma and Boise State. Boise State was not considered even in the same category as a major college power like Oklahoma, but they played them to a tie in regulation, and the game came down to overtime. In college overtime, each team gets the ball on their opponent's 25 yard line and tries to score. After both teams have had a turn, whichever team is ahead wins. Oklahoma went first and scored on a 25 yard touchdown run on their first play. They kicked the extra point, and were ahead by seven points. Then it was Boise State's turn. On fourth down, their last chance, Boise State shifted all of their receivers to the right side and hiked the ball directly to the running back, who started running around the right side where all their blockers were. Only instead of running the ball, he stopped and lobbed a pass to the end zone where it was caught for a touchdown. Then, instead of kicking the extra point, which would have tied the game and send it to a second overtime, Boise State decided to go for two points and the win. They set up with almost the same play they had just run for the touchdown. All the receivers shifted to the right side and the quarterback started to toss a sideways pass to the flanker on that side where all the blockers were lined up. But at the last second he pulled it down and handed it behind his back to the running back, who went the other way around the left side of the line untouched into the endzone for the winning two-points. For you football aficionados, it is called the Statue of Liberty play.

How did that work? How did Boise State score so easily against a far bigger and more talented team like Oklahoma? The answer is simple: the Oklahoma players were faked out of position. When the Boise State quarterback faked a toss to the right side, they all went after it, even the players whose job was a stay in their position and guard against a running play around the left side of the line. If even one Oklahoma player had stayed in his assigned position on the left side, he would have been there to stop the run, because the running back had no blockers in front of him. All the blockers had gone to the other side. If even one Oklahoma player had stayed at home, stayed in his assigned position, they would have won the game. But they all left their positions and went after a fake.

Can you see how this might be relevant to our scripture reading for today? Listen again to Mark 13:5-6. Jesus says, "Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray." This point is so important Jesus repeats it again later in the chapter—verses 21-22: "And if anyone says to you at that time, 'Look! Here is the Messiah!' or 'Look! There he is!'—do not believe it. False messiahs and false prophets will appear and produce signs and omens, to lead astray, if possible, the elect." In other words, don't go for a fake. Don't be lured out of position by going after a false prophet or a false savior.

This can happen in several ways. There have been many people since Jesus' time who claimed to have a special revelation from God, special information that goes beyond what Jesus tells us in the New Testament. They claim to have a new way of being saved, a new way of getting God's blessing. Jesus says, "Don't be faked out of position by those kinds of leaders."

Another way this can happen is when people think that a political leader can save them. Actually, I don't see that happening in our country right now. We are far too cynical. There is not a single candidate in either party that we would mistake for the Messiah.

A more likely danger is in thinking that a person in your life can be your salvation. If you think that a boyfriend or girlfriend, or a husband or wife, or even a child can fulfill your deepest needs, you are doomed to disappointment. In fact you only learn to love someone when you give up the illusion that they can meet all your needs and you learn to love them for who they are, not for what they can do for you.

If you think that anyone other than Jesus can be your Messiah, if you think that anyone other than Jesus can save you and fulfill the deepest longings of your heart, you are following a fake. Like the Oklahoma defense, you are chasing someone who does not have the ball.

Sometimes we are not faked out by phony leaders; we are faked out by difficult situations and painful circumstances. Listen to verses 7-8. Jesus says,

When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. For nation will rise up against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.

Sometimes people are misled not by people but by circumstances. They see hatred and cruelty in the world, even in families, as Jesus says in verse 12, and they say, "There can't be any God. Look at the mess the world is in."

In the light of such circumstances, it is tempting to give up. There was a point in the Fiesta Bowl when Boise State could have given up. Late in the fourth quarter Boise State was ahead by a touchdown, but Oklahoma put together a 77 yard drive to tie the game with just over a minute left. Then when they got the ball after the kickoff, Boise State threw an interception that was run back for a touchdown, and suddenly after leading for the entire game, Boise State was behind by a touchdown with only one minute left. At that point they could have given up, just as followers of Jesus could have given up when they faced persecution or adversity or family rejection. But the Boise State players believed that the game was not over, and it wasn't. In one minute they went the entire length of the field to score a touchdown, using an old football play called the hook and ladder, which I won't try to explain. The point is that they believed the game was not over, and as followers of Jesus we believe the same thing. The game is not over, because God is not finished with us yet.

So what are we supposed to do? Jesus answers that question in verses 34. He says, "It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch." In other words, our job is to stay alert and play our position. And what is our position? Jesus told us that back in verses 9-10: "... and you will stand before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them. And the good news must first be proclaimed to all nations." To keep awake and play our position means to remain faithful to Jesus, to serve him, and to keep on sharing his love with others even when we get discouraged. If we do that, we will win, Jesus says. It is only a matter of time.

Enough about football, I want to close with a story from Corrie ten Boom's book *The Hiding Place*. I have shared stories from this book before, but this particular story that happened when Corrie and her sister Betsie were imprisoned in a German concentration camp called Vught. She describes their arrival at the camp in these words:

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Through another fence we arrived in a yard surrounded on three sides by low concrete buildings. A young woman in a military cape was waiting for us. "Prisoners halt!" barked the red-faced officer. "Explain to the newcomers, *Fraulein*, the function of the bunkers."

"The bunkers," the girl began in the bored voice of a museum guide, "are for the accommodations of those who fail to cooperate with camp rules. The rooms are cozy, if a bit small: about the size of a gym locker. To hasten the educational process the hands are tied above the head..." Even as the horrid recital continued, two guards came out of the bunkers, carrying between them the form of a man. He was alive, for his legs were moving, but he seemed to have no conscious control over them. His eyes were sunken and rolled back in his head. "Not everyone," the girl observed in the same detached drawl, "seems to appreciate the accommodations at the bunkers."

I seized Betsie's arm as the command to march came again, more to steady myself than her. ... We followed the officer down a wide street lined with barracks on either side and halted at one of the gray, featureless sheds. It was the end of the long day of standing, waiting, hoping. ... And still we were not allowed to sit: there was a last wait while the matron with maddening deliberateness checked off our documents against a list. "Betsie!" I wailed, "how long will it take?"

"Perhaps a long, long time." Betsie replied. "Perhaps many years. But what better way could there be to spend our lives?" I turned to stare at her. "Whatever are you talking about?" "These young women," Betsie replied. "That girl back at the bunkers. Corrie, if people can be taught to hate, they can be taught to love! We must find the way, you and I, no matter how long it takes...."

She went on, almost forgetting in her excitement to keep her voice to a whisper, while I slowly took in the fact that she was talking about our guards. I glanced at the matron seated at the desk ahead of us. I saw a gray uniform and a visored hat; Betsie saw a wounded human being. And I wondered, nor for the first time, what sort of person she was, this sister of mine...what kind of road she followed while I trudged beside her on the all-too-solid earth (pp. 178-179).

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How do we wait for Jesus' coming again? "Stay alert," he says. "Keep awake." In other words, play your position. Remain faithful to Jesus and keep sharing his love with others. Because one day, he is going to win.

- Ken Onstot
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