



Links Players

LOSSES AND GAINS 1: TROUBLE

“I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.” (John 16:33, NIV)

YOU DON’T HAVE TO BE LOOKING FOR TROUBLE on the golf course to see it. All you have to do is stand on the tee. Looking down the fairway, your eyes will tell you right away that where there are bunkers and trees and water and boundaries. Start focusing on the trouble and you’ll have a hard time finding the fairway ever again.

But there is also trouble you can’t see from the tee. A well-struck tee shot wiggles to a stop in a divot. You’re oblivious to this until you arrive at your ball, when suddenly it’s hard not to grumble. A good drive like this doesn’t deserve such a fate.

Friends, here we are again, lining up golf with life. You wake up many mornings, knowing just what challenges lie ahead. If you’re smarter than I am, you’ll even build in time for things to go wrong. But then there are the unexpected. In the “old days,” we might have listed flat tires, broken copy machines, or a key employee whose mother died last night. Now we think bigger: cyber ransoms, pandemics, and even ships stuck sideways in the Suez Canal. Everything Jesus said was true, we know, but was anything truer than, “In this world you will have trouble”?

A number of months ago, I was contacted by a friend who participates in one of our Links Fellowships. He’s a consultant who thinks of the big picture, and he was seeing something going on that concerned him. “People have lost a lot during these pandemic shutdowns,” he observed. He thought maybe there was a way to address some of these losses in a Bible study series. As I thought about his phone call, I realized that there are things we have gained as well. In fact, what some process as loss, others might process as gain. There was definitely reason to turn to Scripture.

This week we begin the series. To do so, though, we must acknowledge the painfully obvious: We live amidst trouble. We might bully our way through some things, but other challenges are just too big. In fact, when Jesus referred to “these things” in our passage today, he was wrapping up teaching about some bigger-than-you times of grief. These are situations we have no choice but to endure (just like you have to play from that divot). How will you do it? Our starting point for this series is the starting point Jesus gave his disciples: Take heart in him. He has the ability to overcome.

Opening questions What is a recent mishap that frustrated you on the golf course? How about in your day-to-day activities? Could you have responded better than you did? How so?

READING Job 2:7-10; Psalm 10:12-18; Jeremiah 2:26-28

Job’s perspective (Job 2)

Job lost riches, family, and health overnight. How was his response different than his wife’s? What allowed him to maintain perspective? How would accepting trouble as part of God’s plan alter your thinking?

Affliction and rescue (Psalm 10)

Have you ever considered yourself to be truly afflicted? Where did you go for help at that time? • When you look at the world around you, where do you see affliction? How might you pray for/assist those who are afflicted?

Other saviors (Jeremiah 2)

What error of Israel was Jeremiah exposing? Where do people today turn when they face trouble? What makes this help inferior to the help God provides?



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LOSSES AND GAINS 2: PERSPECTIVE

“Why did I not perish at birth, and die as I came from the womb?” (Job 3:11, NIV)

OH BOY, IS IT EASY TO LOSE PERSPECTIVE DURING A ROUND OF GOLF! One of the reasons for this is stress. Brain research tells us that stress makes it exceedingly hard to process thoughts deeply (which may be one reason you have trouble focusing on your Bible reading sometimes, by the way).

So there you are after a pair of miserable holes that have sent your previously good round toward the trash heap, and your buddy innocently says, “Sure is a nice day to be outside, isn’t it?” You may remember well enough to give him a mostly agreeable, “Yes, it is,” but you’ll know instantly whether you’ve lost perspective by what’s really going on between those ears of yours.

Stress causes us to lose perspective, and stress comes from trouble. It doesn’t even have to be present trouble. We may come to a fresh situation and tell ourselves this isn’t going to go well because of what has happened in similar situations in the past. Thanks to trouble, we can talk ourselves into perspective-robbing stress.

In our study of what can be lost and gained in a time of trouble, perspective just might top the list. A loss of perspective can bring frustration, fear, sleeplessness, impatience, depression—we’ll stop there, because that’s already quite a list.

But trouble can also produce an overhaul of our perspective. The quintessential example of a person facing trouble on the pages of Scripture is Job. He’s the guy who lost his family, his holdings, and eventually large parts of his skin to boils. It was as he was scraping his boils with a shard of pottery that his wife told him to curse God and die. How’s that for encouragement? Job replied that it would be foolish to accept only good from God, but when he finally opened his mouth after days of quiet lament with his friends, Job cursed his very birth. Trouble had taken him this far. To his rock bottom, you might say.

But it is in the troubling darkness of our worst hour that God brings light. He returns our perspective. We weren’t in control of our birth. God gave that to us, just as he gave us the life that has followed, provision by provision. This is where trouble establishes a better perspective. It reminds us to call on God, to count on God. We may lose perspective at first, forgetting that God always has a plan, but once we see that he is in the midst of even our dark days, we gain what we have never had before.

Opening questions What causes you to lose perspective in life? How do you know when this is happening? What does it take to get you back on track?

READING Job 38:1-18; Luke 12:22-31; 1 Timothy 6:6-8

God in his place, we in ours (Job 38)

What marks God’s reminders to Job about the authority the Lord possesses? Can you imagine God addressing your mistaken perspective? What might it sound like? • How do you know when your perspective has been correctly realigned?

Jesus on anxiety (Luke 12)

Trouble and stress can bring anxiety that threatens proper perspective. What did Jesus teach his disciples about facing off against worry? What changes do you need to make in the way you handle anxiety?

Contentment in small things (1 Timothy 6)

How does reducing our life to its beginnings help us find perspective? What hurdles must you clear to find contentment in your life?

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LOSSES AND GAINS 3: GRACE

Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone. (Colossians 4:6, NIV)

DOES GRACE STRIKE YOU AS ONE OF THOSE theological terms that describe what God has done for us while lacking practical application? In this way, it might seem like all those Strokes Gained statistics that help us understand how a PGA Tour player excels but which aren't readily available to the rest of us. Cool, but only as far as it goes.

When it comes to grace, though, Scripture does speak of applications that should fit our lives. In brief, grace is akin to kindness, and we certainly have no reason to be surprised that kindness is something we too can show to others.

So let's consider a definition, then do the work we have been doing in this series: set grace in the midst of trouble.

In the Greek, the word for grace is *charis*. It's a simple enough word that apart from specific theological application can mean "that which affords joy, pleasure, delight, sweetness, charm, loveliness: grace of speech" (Blue Letter Bible). You can see the connection in that last phrase to our passage from Colossians today, where Paul urged his readers to fill their conversations with grace. You might also recognize a similarity with Paul's words in his letter to the Philippians: "Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things" (Philippians 4:8). In our thoughts and in our words, we are to pass on what is excellent in God's eyes, and grace is always excellent.

But now you might guess that we are heading to the golf course, where trouble comes upon us with frequency, just as it does in life. And when trouble comes, we might either lose grace and turn to curt words or express grace beyond all reason, empowered by the Holy Spirit to say uplifting things.

"Freely you have received," Jesus said, "freely give." How can we not apply this to grace, which is among the greatest of all God's gifts to us and which carries all his other gifts as well? Yes, this will be hardest when we are criticized or weary or discouraged. These are only a few of our troubles. But if we can respond with grace rather than lose it, we have gained ground in Jesus' name.

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Opening questions How does your conversation change when you are not playing well? Do you become more testy, clam up, get analytical, or pretty much stay the same? Can this change day to day?

READING Job 10:12; Ephesians 4:32; 1 Peter 4:10-11

The kindness of grace (Job 10)

God's kindness is what is called a communicable attribute—that is, one we can also display. How has God shown kindness to you? How can you show kindness to others?

Grace on display (Ephesians 4)

What individual aspects of grace are listed here? What is our motivation for treating others with grace? What obstacles get in the way of delivering grace as we should?

Stewards of grace (1 Peter 4)

How are our words and our service to others functions of stewarding God's grace? How good are you at letting God do his work in your heart so you can minister well to others?



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LOSSES AND GAINS 4: CONFIDENCE

So they shook the dust off their feet as a warning to them and went to Iconium. And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit. (Acts 13:51-52, NIV)

ON A DAY WHEN A GREAT PUTTER “SEES THE LINE,” you can count on watching that player make a bunch of putts. Confidence takes over and even the longest putts look like they’re going in every time.

I have always been a good putter, but not like that. My confidence peters out. If I make a string of putts early in the round, I start talking to myself about the law of averages. Can I just say that data never wins over confidence? When you start telling yourself that you probably won’t make many more putts today, you won’t make many more putts today.

Confidence is one of golf’s great mysteries. Like momentum in most every sport, you just hope to ride it as long as you can. This is why in recent years, as sport psychology has become more broadly prevalent, the hunt for confidence has been replaced with a commitment to process. Because confidence will always wane sooner or later, it’s good to be able to trust in a routine that can’t be so easily disrupted.

Confidence can again become a casualty when trouble comes in life. Here’s an example: If you were heavily invested heading into the 2008 recession, it is probable that you left that downward season a bit gun shy. You may have moved to much more secure (though less promising) positions for a time. Closer to the heart, you may have been spurned in a marriage proposal or lost a child in pregnancy. These are gut-wrenching experiences, so it’s no wonder you’d be more tentative the next time out.

In the accounts of Acts, we read of many times when the apostles and their companions could have fallen into a hole of lost confidence. Their ministry was rejected and even outlawed. Their detractors came at them with riots and rocks. It would have been easy to step into the shadows and turn to “resource ministry,” mailing out a monthly newsletter from a place of safety. But their confidence was held fast by something far greater than their own courage: the Holy Spirit.

Confidence to do what you know is right and good, especially when trials and tragedy would rob you of your usual assurances, comes from a source simultaneously beyond you and within you if you are one who believes in Jesus.

Opening questions How many missed putts or bad shots does it take before you start slipping in your confidence during a round? Do you have a way to keep your confidence up when this happens?

READING Acts 13:42-52; Nehemiah 6:1-15, 16

Enemies of your confidence (Acts 13)

Do you have (or have you had) those in your life who have tried to strip you of your confidence? Did they succeed? What difference does it make to know that you can remain confident—even joyfully so—in Christ?

Nehemiah’s resolve (Nehemiah 6:1-15)

What routine did Nehemiah adhere to in this passage? How did this routine, which was based on the job given to him by God, help him to stand up to fierce opposition? What spiritual routines can you establish and maintain to counter discouragement in your life?

God’s ultimate authority (Nehemiah 6:16)

When God is working in your life, how might this put them “on notice” about you? Do you see how God can glorify himself through you? What does it do for your confidence when you know your strength and success come from the Lord?



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LOSSES AND GAINS 5: FRIENDSHIP

Wounds from a friend can be trusted... (Proverbs 27:6a, NIV)

GOLF HURTS. Play enough and you'll end up at your chiropractor or physical therapist. You might even need surgery. Fortunately, most of us don't add that much wear and tear to our bodies for the sake of the game we love.

Here's something more: Golfers hurt. I mean, they hurt each other. I have my own stitches thanks to swing of another. And I've been privy to concussions, breath robbers (guys know), and even brain trauma resulting from anger and from accident. Believe me, I do all I can to stay out of another's shank zone. If someone yells "Fore!" I cover my head, turn my back, and duck. Call me a wimp, but I'm not a fan of acute pain.

The irony in being hurt by a golfer, of course, is that the wound usually comes from a friend. They don't mean it, but there it is.

What really hurts in life is when a friend does injure us intentionally. Suddenly we are forced to ask the question: Is this person really a friend? When a business partner reneges or a confidant spreads your privacies in public places, you may only be able to conclude that this "friend" isn't. At least, not anymore. Or not right now. And you find a way to protect yourself.

Life, too, can test friendships. Many seemingly inseparable couples have surrendered to divorce because a special needs child drives a wedge of heavy responsibility between them. Arguments, including church arguments, divide friends. So, too, we discovered in 2020, do politics and pandemics. Many said harsh goodbyes—if they were that cordial—because a long-time friend wasn't red enough, blue enough, scientific enough, or faith-driven enough. Wow.

Friendships actually ignite the middle letter of the LINKS acrostic. The N stands for "Network friends together in Christ." You can't get that phrase right without adopting it all. Friends have a common affinity, like golf. Friends spend purposeful time in each other's company. Friends aren't loosely knit, but entangled in one another's lives. And the thing that holds them together in smooth times and rough is Jesus. That's Jesus, who didn't really care about politics or petty disagreements. He wanted to know one thing: Are you walking this road with me, the road that leads to eternity? Disciples walk that road, with him, and with each other. They walk it even where it is most rocky.

Opening questions When you consider your friendships in life, how many of them are connected to golf? What does the affinity for golf add to your friendship?

READING 1 Samuel 20:1-4, 12-13, 42; Proverbs 27:6; Philippians 4:1-3

Dedication in friendship (1 Samuel 20)

What had come between David and Jonathan? What hard vow did Jonathan make to David? How do we know we can trust the promises of a friend?

Wounds of a friend (Proverbs 27)

What do you think Solomon meant when he wrote that the wounds of a friend can be trusted? When has a true friend wounded you for your own good? How did you receive that wound at the time? Why can you see the good in it now?

Restoring broken friendships (Philippians 4)

What was Paul's tone in verse 1? Why do you think it was important to him that Euodia and Syntyche were reconciled? How is it important to a Christian's worship and witness that he or she not maintain rifts with friends?

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LOSSES AND GAINS 6: FAITH

Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe... (Hebrews 12:28, NIV)

IN THE ACCOMPANYING VIDEO for today's devotion, I asked Jeffrey Cranford, who is a PGA professional, whether he has ever seen a foundational shakeup in the game. He named it: TrackMan, the radar device that gives golfers buckets of feedback about their swing path and ball flight. The overall patterns uncovered by TrackMan have revolutionized swing evaluation and instruction, even when the pricey device isn't available.

On the viewing side, TrackMan's camera-based counterpart, Toptracer, has allowed us to watch televised golf in a vastly improved way. We can see the flight of the ball! It's even more fun to follow your own shots with Toptracer, which you can do at Topgolf's popular driving ranges. Toptracer's president says of the device's inventor, Daniel Forsgren, "He's invented something that has changed the industry." A true shakeup.

Shakeups of this kind don't come along very often. Technologies are always adding to our experiences in life, but many are just adornments, like going from a rotary to a push button phone. The true revolution came when we all started carrying our phones wherever we went.

The real shakeups in life are far greater than any of these examples, though. They are events that strike us personally and force us to respond. The spread of the coronavirus and the public restrictions that followed initiated changes for many of us, particularly in our routines and relationships. Some suffered greatly in emotional and psychological ways due to the lack of human connection. This was especially true for older people and those with compromised health; suddenly their infrequent contact with others was reduced to almost nothing.

Alongside the shaking of emotional frameworks, people found their faith put to the test. *Should I trust the doctors or God, or both? The time I spend with others in prayer and fellowship is being robbed—what can I do to keep growing when I can't grow with others?* Big questions, and rightly asked, because rather than giving up on God when trouble comes, such questions keep us looking for him in the midst of it. Where else can we turn? He alone cannot be shaken; his kingdom is sure. And nothing that happens on earth should turn us from worshiping him.

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Opening questions Have you had the opportunity to work with TrackMan or a similar swing monitor? What helpful information did it give you? Did you make changes because of what you learned?

READING Psalm 18:1-19; Hebrews 12:25-29; 2 Corinthians 4:8-11

A sure deliverer (Psalm 18)

What images of trouble and rescue did David present in this psalm? How does it increase your honor and worship of God when you openly acknowledge the trouble in your life?

Shaken/Unshaken (Hebrews 12)

How do you know when your world has been shaken? What are your usual responses when you get knocked off your mark? How would worship make a difference at times like these?

Trouble and life (2 Corinthians 4)

Paul wrote here of harsh trouble, but also pointed to the life believers have in Christ. What helps you remember to turn to Jesus when your back is against a wall? Do you sense his life sustaining you in these times?



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LOSSES AND GAINS 7: HOPE

Yet [Abraham] did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised. (Romans 4:20-21, NIV)

RYDER CUP WEEK LIES JUST AHEAD and, like the Solheim Cup earlier this month, it can provide twists and turns and wonderful excitement. We choose our side, of course, but really what we're looking for as fans is a close set of matches with maybe a bit of feistiness from the players thrown in.

For the players, this is a very different week, filled with tension and passion and hope. On the surface, this looks the same as a major. Here's the difference: Your hope is held by others. You can play your heart out and win every one of your matches, but if your teammates don't come through, your dreams of victory are dashed.

Some players have been fully honest with me in interviews through the years. This is one of the reasons they chose to make golf their sport. Your results are in your own hands, not the hands of others. In this way, you control the fulfillment of your hope.

We all know that's not entirely true. Sometimes things you can't control influence the outcome: Weather. Illness. The play of others. And yes, we see the same in life, where troubles big and small stick their neck into our plans, threatening our hope for a favorable ending to the story we think we're writing.

But what if it isn't life that tries our hope? What if it's God himself?

In the case of Abraham, God had the fulfillment of a big promise in store. He just wanted Abraham to recognize that it was God, not himself, upon which his hopes must rest. So while God had told Abraham that he would be the "father of many nations" and that his offspring would be "as countless as the stars," Abraham and Sarah could not get pregnant. In this matter, they had every reason to give up hope. They even tried an illegitimate workaround through Sarah's servant (Genesis 16).

Yet Paul offered the Romans a Holy Spirit-inspired assessment of what was really going on in Abraham's heart of faith: He kept hoping in the work of God. That's all we've really got, folks. We can dream and plan and prepare with diligence, but God orders the course of events that brings the story's end. Our hope is in him, not in us.

Opening questions As a golf fan, do you prefer the majors or a hearty team event like the Ryder Cup? How about as a player—would you rather go it alone or team up with others?

READING Genesis 18:1-15; Psalm 33:16-22; Romans 4:18-21

What God can do (Genesis 18)

The question God asked Abraham—"Is anything too hard for the LORD?"—becomes a question for all of us. When have you wondered if God could get the job done? How has he proven himself to you over time?

False hopes (Psalm 33)

The psalmist wrote of the false hopes of kings. What lesser hopes do we latch onto in our time? Why will these things often fail us? What's the hardest part about waiting for God to do his work?

Abraham's hope (Romans 4)

Verse 18 tells us that Abraham had hope "against all hope." Have you ever clung to hope when it seemed worthless? Looking back now, what role did God play in bringing you to a favorable outcome?

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LOSSES AND GAINS 8: LOVE

But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8, NIV)

IT WAS OF THE SILLIEST PLAYGROUND REJOINDERS WE KNEW AS KIDS: “If you love it, why don’t you marry it?” It could apply to anything. If I said I loved the applesauce in my lunch that day, someone was sure to say, “Well, if you love it, why don’t you marry it?”

In truth, many of us who love the game of golf understand that this isn’t just a facetious question. In a way, we’ve married it. We spend big bundles of money and time and thought for golf. We speak of it with a gleam in our eye and a deep appreciation in our voice. And even when it betrays us, we welcome it back with full forgiveness and tee it up again tomorrow. We’re helpless romantics.

Love is the closing topic, a sort of climax, in our studies of what can be lost during a time of trouble. And what a topic it is, for in it we are reminded that love really cannot be proven except in the face of hardship. It’s easy to love when everything’s coming up pars and birdies. It’s life’s double bogeys that put love to the test.

One of the reasons that trouble threatens love is that trouble pushes us toward isolation. This is true not only in times of quarantine or social unrest, when it’s safest to stay behind closed doors away from others. When pain comes upon us in the loss of a loved one, say, we can shrink back into our personal space and stay there alone, wary of being hurt again. Many grieving believers can’t even bring themselves to go to church. Too many sideways glances, too many platitudes.

Into this very context you may hear echoes of Tennyson’s well-known line: “’Tis better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all.” There is a price to be paid when it comes to love, and often that price is painful. Ask Jesus.

When Jesus Christ went to the cross, shedding his blood to cover our sins, he did not do so in an ethereal sense, as if he felt no pain or anguish. Rather, the beatings bruised his face, the scourging shredded his skin, the crucifixion pierced his body and slowly took his breath away. But there was more. He was there as an innocent man, bearing instead our sins, dying for us as sinners. What a weight!

When trouble comes, you can stop taking the risks of love. Or you can call on God to carry you through as he carried Jesus, with all his love still intact.

Opening questions How would others know you love golf without even asking you? Has what you love most about golf changed or expanded over time?

READING John 13:1; 1 Corinthians 13:4-7; 1 John 3:16-18

Jesus’ endless love (John 13)

From what you know of the Gospel accounts, what all was involved in Jesus’ loving his disciples “to the end”? Still, Jesus’ love does not end. How do you know that he loves you, too?

Characteristics of love (1 Corinthians 13)

Which traits here stand out most to you? Is this because you have seen them demonstrated well, or because they need attention in your life? What can you do to move closer to this standard?

Love received, love given (1 John 3)

What does it mean to you that you should “lay down your life for others”? What are some things that hinder you from giving and receiving love? How does knowing Christ change your motivation in loving others?
