

“Plotting An Overthrow”

¹²Therefore, brothers, we have an obligation—but it is not to the sinful nature, to live according to it. ¹³For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live, ¹⁴because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. ¹⁵For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." ¹⁶The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. ¹⁷Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.

On April 28th of this year Saddam Hussein would have been eighty-two years old. Not so very long ago that was the most celebrated day on the Iraqi calendar. Today, however, the ousted, humbled and imprisoned and executed dictator is rarely discussed in Iraqi society. With Saddam and his henchmen out of power and out of life the world has seen hundreds of Iraqi's come forward with unspeakable tales of cruelty and torture at the hands of his former regime. The press has largely failed to cover these stories as unimportant. Many stories of atrocities were huge and wide spread.

The stories of the Iraqi national soccer team seem to stand out vividly in my mind. After the athletes spoke openly, we learned that they were severely punished if they did not win. Before each game, Odai, Saddam's eldest son would call the team captain with threats of imprisonment, or worse, if they lost. Emmanuel Baba, a team member has

recounted that the players would tremble with fear and even cry openly from that fear. Players were intermittently flogged, imprisoned and put into forced labor after losing important games. If they quit, they faced execution. Star player, Laith Hussein, was quoted, “I thought of leaving soccer, but how could I? I was afraid of what Odai would do to me and my family. I wanted to play soccer for myself and the Iraqi people, not Odai. Their suffering was linked to a game. A game invented for fun was turned into a venue for torture and repression. Repression like that sometimes seems to us to be a million miles away, part of an alien culture, a distant drama played out some where else. But is it? That story is in reality quite near to many of us, maybe all of us. Maybe my inner demons are like many of yours.

I have had many successes in my life. But what motivated my efforts for victory? Was it the fun of the game or the fear of punishment if I didn't win? No, no one was waiting on the side lines to beat me but I always felt beat up when I lost. Have my accomplishments been fueled by the fulfillment I feel when I use my gifts well, or by the tyrannical threat to my self worth if I don't always come out on top? Do I ascend to this platform weekly to play for the kingdom that I represent, or has it been for some hidden, inward Odai, calling each Sunday with his threats?

There are two motives that can make a soccer player try hard; the fear of Odai or the fun of the game. There are two motives that can make a person learn; the fear of the test or the thrill of discovery. There are two motives for succeeding in life; the fear of falling short or the faith that flies above failure. I believe it is really that simple. I believe that all people who try hard at life do so for one of two reasons; they're fearful and looking for

acceptance, or they're fulfilled and looking to make a difference. Can you hear those echoes of Paul in the sections of Romans that is our scripture passage for today? "For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." Literally, "Daddy."

These opposing life motivators are matters of the heart and can be hidden from public view. The silent tyranny in my life wasn't revealed to me until I really wanted to improve my life. An honest inventory of my strengths and weaknesses revealed some recurring problems in my character that lead to some hard questions. And to be quite frank, I'm not done getting better." Here is the plain truth. I, Jeff Stratton have difficulty with criticism. I have mixed motives behind my best efforts. I tend to hear innocent questions or comments as criticism. Gayle's innocent, "the garbage needs to go out" sounds to me like, "you're slacking off," or. "you're too stupid to realize that tomorrow is Thursday. A fairly innocuous, "I really have missed you this week" sounded to me like "you're a bad husband." Why am I so sensitive? And, then those mixed motives? Even when I am at my best, preaching well, helping someone in a crisis, or reaching out to help a hurting person, I often wonder, "Am I just doing this to help my church be successful so I will be a successful pastor and feel good about myself? Or, Why do I want everyone to like me?"

I feel unduly doomed by my failures. Several years ago I had a conversation with the chairman of Trustees about the gutters, I remembered that we had discussed a leak that was over the back door at the last trustees meeting and the fact that I hadn't gotten it fixed yet. I nearly got up immediately to go get the ladder from behind the baptistery and the caulk to get up there and fix it right away. I felt I had somehow failed and doomed by my

failure. I work so hard every week to hit a homerun in preaching because I know that if I don't I will feel like I have failed and a pulpit committee will be formed next week. I am driven to succeed, failure is not an option. Why can't I fail without feeling like a failure?

I often feel overly responsible for other's burdens. For the last month I find myself watching TV and thinking, "How can I sit here and enjoy this show while all those people I met in Burma have so little?" How can I care for others without having to take on the weight of the world? I turn down honorariums and gifts, I don't let people buy me lunch, it's not real humility, I just don't want to fall into a cycle that I have seen so many other pastors fall into. I know I am susceptible. I don't know how I have kept myself from the snare of my addictive personality. Mostly fear I suppose. I haven't been swept away by sexual addictions because it would cost me my ministry and the esteem of the church. I wouldn't take any pain medication, because drug addiction runs in my family. I have kept away from being a full scale workaholic because I feared my wife leaving me. Why did I rely on fear to keep me from addictive behavior? Though I am successful in many endeavors, I always feel like an imposter. Once when a professor in my MDIV program returned a written class assignment with the following note, "Jeff, you really ought to think about writing professionally, your heart and words really speak to people", I remember thinking, "You just don't have any idea, I'm not that smart." And I wondered, "What is it in me that causes me to mentally and emotionally snatch defeat from the jaws of victory?" What is it that causes so many of us to imagine ourselves unworthy, unlovable and hopeless? I now know the answer is shame. And shame is a tyrant that we must overthrow. Shame doesn't wear a bushy mustache. Shame puts no giant statues on display. Shame's

portrait isn't on every street corner. Shame actually rules from the shadows. It lurks from beneath the rock ledge of our souls, not in fear of the larger fish but in silent strength as it waits to dart out into the open waters of our lives and spew it's venom into what should be our greatest moments and then run back into hiding to paralyze us the next time we get close to success. Shame.

Shame, simply put, is a feeling of being inwardly flawed, of not measuring up. It sometimes creeps into our lives when we were belittled as a child. Shame often worms it's way into our psyche when alcoholism, divorce or bankruptcy breaks a family apart. It brings us low when we accept the truth that we hear from pulpits that we are sinful, evil at our core and then fail to be brought into the wonderful freedom of Grace. And it is grace that can overthrow the dictator, it is grace that displaces the tyranny of shame. It is grace that puts shame in the defendants chair and pronounces the sentence that shame is a primary tool of the deceiver, our enemy. Shame is the knife to the heart of the real power of the cross...Grace.

Shame is the dust under the bed. The dirt in the corner. The mess that for so many is just beyond the reach of the cleaning agent of grace. In this series I want you to be open-minded. Many people don't think that they have shame issues, but all people do to some extent. It can have classic roots, broken home, alcoholic parent, abuse, molestation, performance pressure, love with strings attached. Shame may have invaded your life like secondhand smoke from the polluted atmosphere of a fallen, sinful world. Shame is everywhere and the favorite tool of so many. The coach, "What do you think you were doing? You don't shoot the ball with 20 seconds left on the shot clock from 35 feet!"

Parents, “You were taught better than that, shame on you for even imagining you could get away with that!” Neighbors, “We had a quiet little neighborhood till you moved those hooligans in.” Churches, “A real Christian would not think, do or imagine such things.” Shame on you!!! But this series is designed to get “The shame off of you.” We want to clean up the mess and shuck the shame.

Please don't think that your shame is too deep for anyone to understand. No matter how deep your wound is, no matter how long the shame has resided in the inner most parts of you...there's hope for you in this series. Now please don't imagine that freedom from shame comes easily or automatically. Every tyrant holds onto position and power tenaciously and most often must be drug from the seat of power. That is why there have been few bloodless overthrows, few bloodless Coup D'etats. But in this series I have planned an overthrow. I can...You can...We can...overthrown the tyrant of shame. We begin the process by listening to the whispered message of the Holy Spirit given to Paul and transmitted to the believers in Rome. “Those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. ¹⁵For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, Daddy.” We start a revolution that is unstoppable when we repeat the promise, “We are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.” Real freedom is available. The real freedom of GRACE is sweet, sweeter than anything you have ever tasted. And maybe for some of us, here is the best part...no calories.

Imagine being able to laugh when you fall instead of looking around to see who is laughing. Imagine failure becoming a teacher to instruct you rather than a ghost to haunt

you. Imagine having no need to put others down because you feel so good about yourself. Imagine feeling no terror at the thought of baring your soul to a confidant or a room full of strangers. The freedom to be you, in all your fallenness, with all you past but with the assurance of your future and in the strength of a grace so big that it spills out of you, “good measure, pressed down, shaken together and over flowing.” Imagine that. Or, imagine this your, thirst for booze, the adult channel, a shopping binge, the applause of those whose acceptance you desire or whatever numbs your hidden anxiety is gone, quenched by a stream of living mercy and grace.

I want to expose this two bit dictator, this paper lion for what it is, a despot who rules by fear. And remember, “We did not receive a spirit of fear” not from Jesus anyway. It is time to plot an overthrow. When you see shame in all it’s ugliness, in all it’s tyranny, when you understand it, I think you will join me in saying, “I can’t believe I have been motivated by and lived with this monster for so long, I want...FREEDOM.” And, you will get it, freedom that is when you are tired of the tyranny and you join in the plot to overthrow the dictator called shame. It’s time to change your motive for success. It’s time to quit performing for Odai, the tyrant. I hope you join me in this series through Lent. Because it’s time. Time to perform for the sheer joy of the journey. Time to go from fear to fulfillment. Time to shuck the hidden pressure and find hidden peace. Time to enjoy excellence instead of striving for it. Though others may try to motivate you through the phrase “Shame on you.” There is a new command, “Shame off you!”