

GOD'S GAMBIT

What's Your Next Move? | John 20:1-18

I

One of my favorite binge watches of the past year was the *QUEEN'S GAMBIT*, a Golden Globe-winning series on Netflix. Have you seen it? For those who haven't, it's the story of Beth Harmon, a girl whose life looks to be tragically ruined when a car accident leaves her orphaned at age nine. It's the 1950's and Beth is placed in a stern orphanage for girls, where everyone hopes for adoption but rescue like that rarely comes. The kids are sedated with daily doses of meds -- a habit Beth sadly never kicks. Yet despite the darkness of all this, there are a few rays of light.

Beth is befriended by a bold girl named Jolene who protects and encourages her. And in the basement of that orphanage, the resident janitor, Mr. Shaibel, introduces Beth to the game of CHESS. While Beth loses badly and often at the start, it turns out that she doesn't just have a good mind for this game; she is uncommonly brilliant at it. We follow Beth's journey as she takes on tougher and tougher opponents, steadily rising toward the pinnacle of international competition. The pressure, however, leads Beth deeper and deeper into her addictions and isolation. When she finally faces the current world champion, Beth's external foe and her internal demons bring her to a point when it looks like she's about to be checkmated.

I've asked myself: Why did this story become the #1 show with adults on Netflix last year? My theory is that as unrealistic as the story is in places, there's a lot about it that feels like a parable of real life. A lot of us relate to the vulnerability of this orphan child. No matter how old we grow, there's a part of us that often feels like we're on our own in life. We've each suffered our own tragedies and losses. We're up against wily opponents. Like Beth, many of us struggle with anxiety or addictions that are strangely intertwined with our gifts. We're looking for a greater sense of "home."

Sometimes, life is like a massive chess game. We may start out with quite a bit of optimism when we are young, but then the game becomes harder. As the pieces of life move, it becomes more confusing. There are potential pathways but also looming perils. We frown and hesitate, wondering if we are making the right move. And then come these periods when the game seems to close down around us. Our path is blocked. Our options are limited. We're losing more.

Sooner or later, we find ourselves facing rejection... job loss... divorce... financial problems... a crisis with our kids... serious illness. If it's not checkmate, we fear it's close. Maybe some of you are there today. Perhaps you know someone who is. Maybe it's around the corner. Perhaps this is why God wanted you to hear this message today.

II

You see, we have company in this experience. The players in the story of Easter found themselves on that sort of square. When they'd started out following the charismatic rabbi from Nazareth, the game looked so promising. There were all kinds of places they could and would go, so many good moves to be made. As the game wore on, the audience around Jesus just kept getting bigger and bigger. Jesus was an amazing player. The pharisees and teachers of the law kept making moves against Him, but Jesus escaped every time. He ran circles around them. When Christ came through the gates of Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, the crowd went wild. This Passover would be the tournament when Jesus would take down Rome, the reigning world champions. Jesus would be crowned and all His disciples knew that they would be winners with Him.

And, then, in the four days between Palm Sunday and the the Passover, the game suddenly turned. Jesus started losing pieces and position. Judas betrayed Him. The authorities arrested Him. His bishop, Peter, and his knights, Matthew, James, and the other disciples, disappeared from the board. His opponents beat Jesus – I mean, literally. They stripped him of everything. The crowd who'd cheered Him, now jeered at his defeat. *"I guess he wasn't really the champion we thought he would be,"* some said. Everything Jesus was and stood for and promised died on that Cross. It was checkmate. The King was knocked down... laid on his side... put in a bag... stuck in the closet of a borrowed grave. Game over.

Noone yet understood that all of this was simply GOD'S GAMBIT. In the game of chess, there is a move that is called a "gambit." In simplest terms *a "gambit" is a calculated sacrifice in order to gain an advantage.* It usually involves surrendering a piece at the edge of the board in order to move into command of the center. In the final episode of the Queen's Gambit, Beth Harmon performs such a move. I'll spare you the detail and let you watch the series for yourself.

Here's the important part: In a far greater and not-fictional game, God did something similar. On Good Friday, God sacrificed his most powerful playing piece – Jesus himself. To everyone watching, the surrender of that royal life, appeared to be an unconditional defeat. But it was a calculated sacrifice in order to gain an unconditional advantage for YOU and me. You see, as I explained further on Good Friday, the death of Jesus was a sacrifice so pure and huge that it counterweighed the gravity of everyone's sin. In a cosmic sense, it made up for all the broken covenants and all the sins that have ever occurred or ever will. It was an act of love so heroic and unselfish that everyone who has TRULY understood it since, has voluntarily sought to give Jesus command of the center of their life board. I know I have. I hope you have or will.

And then, to demonstrate that He actually has the power to forgive sins in Jesus' name and the authority to be at the center of our lives, God did something more stunning. He went into the closet we call the Tomb, resurrected the King of Kings out of the bag in

which He'd been sealed, and set Him on the board again more alive than ever before. The evidence and experience of that resurrection was so overwhelming to the first Christians that it utterly reoriented the game of life for them.

Because they were now convinced that even their worst sins could be forgiven, they became people of amazing grace toward others. Because they were now certain that God had one more move after death had played, they lived with immense courage and hope in the face of suffering. The Early Church lived with confidence that all the evil and corruption and violence and pain that happen in this world will one day be defeated, forgotten, wiped off the board, because God has the power to start a New Game. This is what Easter means: There is forgiveness. There is life beyond death. There is the promise of a New World to come.

III

Do you get that? Are you moving across the board of your life with that kind of grace, courage, and confidence? Or are you a bit like Mary on that first Easter morning? The Bible says that when Mary met a man in the garden outside the Garden Tomb on Easter morning, **"She did not realize that it was JESUS" (John 20:14)**. She was so filled with grief that she didn't yet get the kind of ChessMaster Jesus was and that even in the darkness, He was right here with her. Maybe the game of your life is going badly enough right now that its genuinely hard to believe that God is in control and at work for good.

It can be like that for a lot of us. It's why one of my other favorite TV shows is the family drama, THIS IS US. Maybe you know it. The characters in that program are complex and fascinating ones and they go through the struggles that so many of us do. But what I love most about the show is how the writers play with TIME.

At one moment, you are seeing the characters living in the present moment. For example, you're seeing the couple, Kate and Toby rejoicing in the birth of their baby, Jack, and then shortly later coming to terms with the heart-breaking reality that the child they've so longed for has, tragically, been born blind.

And then the story flashes back to a moment in the past. You're seeing the mother, Kate, when she was an insecure adolescent with something of a musical gift. Because her gift is not quite as great as her mother Rebecca's singing ability, Kate comes to the conclusion that she'll probably never really produce anything that meaningful from her life. Remembering the earlier scene, you think, "Oh no. This blind baby Kate now has in the present... He's the fulfillment of that foreboding Kate had in the past."

And then the camera shifts again. You find yourself in a massive concert hall. You're not sure what dimension of time you are in because you don't recognize any of the characters. What you see is a handsome young man with easy grace, striding out

across the stage. He stops at a microphone and begins to sing. It's a song of such beauty and power. It's a song from a soul sweetened by suffering and strengthened by love. And as the crowd goes wild, you realize that there's something else about this remarkable star. He's blind. And, suddenly, you understand: This is the future.

Your mind flashes back to the depressed girl with the love of singing... It races ahead to the time she is a fearful mom hoping she'll find the courage to raise a blind baby... And then it flashes forward to the mysterious and magnificent fruit of all these eras... of all these inputs... of all these ripples of providence playing out across time. And it hits you: Maybe I can't predict the future from where I stand today. Maybe there is a purpose that is flowing through it all... moving us toward a beautiful fulfillment.

The whole story of the Bible is trying to tell us that. All the Old Testament covenants that point toward something more... the sacrifice on Good Friday and the surprise on Easter Sunday... they are all telling us that life is not checkers. It is a multi-dimensional chess game in which God is working out his glorious purposes on levels and with angles and with a passion to bless all people that you and I, understandably, cannot fully see.

So, no matter how the game of life looks for you right now, remember, God is not out of moves and neither are you. The most important move you could make today is to ask Jesus to come occupy the center of your life – not the edges of your board... not the box in the closet until you feel like pulling him out. Jesus calls your name and mine today, as He did Mary's. Going forward from here, let Him be your central **"Teacher."**

And then, as your second move, attach yourself to a community of other people who can encourage you as you listen to Christ's teaching and play the game of life. In the QUEEN'S GAMBIT, Beth Harmon doesn't reach her full potential until she lets Jolene and a host of others help her move forward. In THIS IS US, none of the main characters make significant progress until they accept the help of family of one kind or another. Jesus understands this about the game of life. It's why His main act after Easter was to establish the Church – not a dusty institution, but a vital community of worship, growth and service. You are welcome here. We'd love to connect with you even more often, even more deeply, and learn to follow Jesus' teaching together.

That's the good news and the invitation this Easter. With sacrificial love and resurrecting power, God has moved toward you. ***So, what's your next move?***