“What a difference it would make if Scripture informed our participation in and observation of sports: every play, every game, every season could be a heart-revealing, character-developing experience for the glory of God. In this book, Stephen Altrogge shows us how to bring Scripture into the game—and apply it to our hearts. Full of personal anecdotes and recollections of some of the greatest moments in recent sports history, Game Day is a biblical and insightful playbook for anyone who loves to play or watch sports.”

—C. J. MAHANEY, Sovereign Grace Ministries

“A new, eye-opening look into sports and the gift from God that sports really are. It has helped adjust my perspective to see how God uses sports to reveal the hidden sin in my heart.”

—STEVE BOSDOSH, Golf Magazine Top 100 Teacher; PGA golf instructor; contributor to Golf Magazine and Sports Illustrated

“As I am a father of three boys, pastor and minister to professional athletes, Altrogge’s book provided for me sound biblical principles for enjoying the ‘game day’ as well as seeing sports as a tool for sanctification. I wish Stephen’s book were around when Jesus saved my life while playing college football. In a neglected area of discourse Game Day and the Glory of God brings a gospel-centered voice to one of America’s biggest idols. Humorous stories coupled with serious self-reflection, this work is a valuable resource to have as well as a practical guide to many aspects of ministry.”

—GARY SHAVEY, pastor at Mars Hill Church and chaplain for the Seattle Mariners

“What a wonderful and refreshing take on sports that brings God to the position where he should be: Head Coach, Manager, Commissioner! Stephen makes clear God is in every part of our sporting lives. We may think the score of the game is important, but God is only concerned about the score of the game in victory over the enemy (that does not mean the Cowboys). This book is a blessing for anyone who has or needs perspective. Stephen himself is blessed, though the Lord has placed on his heart the Pittsburgh Pirates.”

—DAVID STEIN, talk radio host, A Celebration of Life Through Sports

“I could relate to a lot of what Stephen wrote on these pages—sports are often just a shrine to Self, and that manifests itself in an all-encompassing desire to be The Best. That said, there is still much to enjoy and value in sports, and this book will help parents, coaches, and young athletes form a biblical perspective on the games they play.”

—TED KLUCK, author, ESPN.com contributor
“We’re in desperate need of regaining control of our hearts, minds, and bodies when it comes to competitive sports. I love sports—especially basketball. But as a player and now a fan, I’ve often participated in ways just shy of insanity. Stephen Altrogge helps a fan like me, players just beginning or in their prime, coaches, and parents approach the enjoyment of sports in their right mind—which is to say with the glory and enjoyment of God as their highest goal. I needed this book as a teenager and now as a parent of young athletes. I plan to share this with the many parents in my church as well. Thanks, Stephen, for pointing us to the Source of our giftedness and joy in sports, God himself.”

—THABITI ANYABWILE, Senior Pastor, First Baptist Church, Grand Cayman Islands

“A must-read for all kinds of athletes, from high school on up through the professional ranks. Drawing from the personal experience of his lifelong love affair with sports, as well as his practical knowledge of Scripture, Stephen Altrogge shows how the sins and temptation that often come with competition can be redeemed for the glory of God.”

—PHILIP GRAHAM RYKEN, Senior Minister, Tenth Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia

“At a time when sport supplants religion and athletes are revered as heroes, it does us good to consider if and how we can use sports to bring honor to God. In Game Day and the Glory of God, Stephen Altrogge does just that, exploring both the benefits and challenges that await those of us who enjoy the action and drama of sports. Stephen relies on the Bible’s timeless wisdom to guide us to a deeper appreciation of God and a deeper abiding in the truths of the gospel on game day and every day.”

—TIM CHALLIES, blogger; editor at www.discriminatingreader.com

“Many Christians have felt vaguely embarrassed by their love of sports, thinking that it is somehow unspiritual. Stephen Altrogge clears away the confusion by showing how sports are gifts from God to be enjoyed. He even shows us how to play the game for God’s glory and our own spiritual growth. The next time the umpire cries out, ‘Play ball!’ we can take the field with excitement, knowing that competition can be good for the soul and can actually bring us closer to God.”

—DR. RAY PRITCHARD, President, Keep Believing Ministries; author, Credo: Believing in Something to Die For, An Anchor for the Soul, and Fire and Rain: The Wild-Hearted Faith of Elijah
GAME DAY
FOR THE GLORY OF GOD

A Guide for Athletes, Fans, & Wannabes

STEPHEN ALTROGGE

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To my wife,
  Jen,
the love of my life
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This book is the result of the unmerited kindness of God upon a wicked sinner. Apart from God drawing me to himself, opening my eyes to the gospel, and putting his Spirit within me, this book would never have been written. And if God had not given me the gift of communication, this book would be nothing more than an idea in my head. So I want to begin by transferring all glory to God for any good that is accomplished by this book.

God was also kind to give me many friends that helped me during and after the writing process. Thanks to my dad for being the editor of my first draft and pushing me to be more creative. Thanks to Justin Taylor for making this book happen. Apart from your help, my friend, this book simply wouldn’t exist. Thanks to Ted Griffin for being a patient, joyful, flexible editor.

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Finally, I must thank my wife Jen. You have graciously freed me to do all that’s necessary in writing a book. You and I rejoiced together when I found out that the book was going to be published. You joyfully worked with me on the tedious process of editing the manuscript. Without your loving support I don’t think I would have been able to write this book. I love you with all my heart, and this book is dedicated to you.
CHAPTER ONE

A LIFE FOR THE GLORY OF GOD

Some moments are frozen in history and burned upon our mind’s eye. Moments of ecstatic victory and of heartbreaking defeat. We can see them as clearly as if they happened yesterday. With incredible clarity we can see Michael Jordan using a crossover dribble to free himself from coverage, then draining the game-winning jump shot against the Utah Jazz in game six of the 1998 NBA Finals. We remember Joe Carter thrusting both hands skyward and joyfully leaping into the air after hitting a home run to win the World Series in 1993. Or who can forget the precision-perfect touchdown pass thrown by Pittsburgh Steelers wide receiver Antwaan Randle El to a wide-open Hines Ward in the 2006 Super Bowl?

Of course, not all is glory in the world of sports. We remember the heartbreaks just as well. Tennessee Titans fans shudder when they hear the name Mike Jones. Jones crushed the Titans’ hopes of a Super Bowl XXXIV victory when he wrapped his arms around Titans wideout Kevin Dyson as Dyson lunged for what would have been the game-winning touchdown. Pittsburgh Pirate fans curse and spit when they hear the name Francisco Cabrera. It was Cabrera who single-handedly dashed the Pirates’ bid for a trip to the 1992 World Series with a clutch pinch-hit...
single in the bottom of the ninth inning of the National League Championship Series.

We have our own moments of glory and defeat as well. Winning a pickup basketball game with a fadeaway three-pointer. Letting the winning goal slip through our hands in a game of soccer. Running a marathon for the first time. Trying to run a marathon but collapsing in exhaustion before the finish. We cherish the victories and cringe at the defeats.

We live in a world that has fallen madly in love with sports. Every year hundreds of millions of people gather together to play and watch and talk about sports. There are magazines devoted to baseball, football, chess, badminton, poker, Uno, and every other sport imaginable. Stadiums are packed to maximum capacity. Teams that win a championship are given a victory parade and treated like war heroes. Men come together every Saturday to engage in fierce combat on an asphalt battlefield called a basketball court. We seek to improve our holiness and our batting average in church softball leagues. Professional athletes are idolized, and small children can be seen sporting jerseys of their favorite players. Students at the University of West Virginia light couches on fire after thrilling victories. We live in a society that is absolutely crazy about sports, and for many people, sports are their life.

Sports are not merely a modern phenomenon either. For thousands of years athletes have come together to engage in fierce competition. In ancient Rome massive, bloodthirsty crowds would gather to watch gladiators hack each other to pieces with swords. The Olympics were born in ancient Greece, and according to legend the first marathon was also run in ancient Greece. Scripture itself mentions sports in 1 Corinthians 9:24 where Paul says, “Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it.”

There is something mystical, almost supernatural about
sports. Something that resonates deep within our hearts. Victory gives us goose bumps and brings us to the verge of tears. We watch in hushed awe as men and women perform athletic feats that seem to defy the laws of physics. Our love for sports often transcends race and politics. We instinctively root for the underdog and are delighted when a weaker team upsets a stronger team. Statistics are our lifeblood. We sometimes have trouble remembering the birthdays of our children but have no problem remembering that Nolan Ryan pitched seven no-hitters. Sports touch us at a deep level, engaging both our hearts and our minds.

**DOES GOD REALLY CARE?**

As a Christian who absolutely loves sports, I find myself asking several questions. Why did God create sports in the first place? What does God think about sports? Is he interested in our wins and losses and all the organized chaos that happens in between? What are God’s priorities in sports? Does the Maker of all things care whether I make my free throws? Does high-sticking bother the High and Exalted One? Is there any connection between Jesus and a jump shot? The answers to these questions are crucial for any Christian who enjoys watching or playing sports.

But before we can determine God’s priorities for us in sports we must determine his priorities for us in life. We must first answer the age-old question, why are we here? The answer to this question provides a foundation for answering all other questions. Those who know and embrace God’s purpose for their lives will also know and embrace God’s purpose for sports. Similarly, those who reject God’s purposes for life will also reject God’s purposes for sports. Therefore it is absolutely critical that we know why God made us! Those who miss the boat here will find themselves in the dark on every other question of eternal importance.
Our Purpose in Life

Fortunately, God has made things very clear. He hasn’t left us to wander hopelessly in the dark. In the Bible we find God’s purpose for all men and women clearly spelled out. Isaiah 43:6–7 says, “I will say to the north, Give up, and to the south, Do not withhold; bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the end of the earth, everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made” (emphasis added).

There it is, the answer to the most important question in all of life! God made you and me for his glory. Our existence isn’t the result of a cosmic accident. We are not the by-products of a massive explosion that occurred six billion years ago. No, we were created by God for his glory. To bring something glory means to make it look great. When an Olympic weight lifter wins a gold medal for his country, he brings it glory. He makes his country look really good. After eating a delicious meal we feel compelled to speak. We heap praises on the chef for the tenderness of the steak or the succulence of the apple pie. That brings glory to the chef. It shows just how good the chef really is. God is the most beautiful, amazing, wonderful, glorious being who ever existed, and he has made us to bring honor and worship to him. To do anything else is wicked. First Corinthians 10:31 puts it this way: “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.”

Pretty clear, isn’t it? We were created for one all-encompassing purpose: to bring glory to God in all that we do. In his book Don’t Waste Your Life John Piper puts it this way: “God created me—and you—to live with a single, all-embracing, all-transforming passion—namely, a passion to glorify God by enjoying and displaying his supreme excellence in all the spheres of life.”¹ The goal of our lives is worship. Scripture calls us to live in such a way that everything we do and say is worship to God! Worship is not simply the
songs we sing on Sunday morning. Worship extends to every facet of our lives. Eating a steak or slurping a milkshake or, as Scripture says, “whatever” we do can be a form of worship. That most certainly includes playing, watching, and talking about sports.

Consider this for a moment. Scripture tells us that everything we do is to be done to the glory of God. Every jump shot and every slap shot. Every single and every strikeout. Every victory and every defeat. Whether we ride the bench or start every game of the season, all of it is to be done to the glory of God.

**THE PROBLEM**

There is a problem, however. A huge problem. That problem is called sin, and it affects every single one of us. Sin is any failure to conform to the moral standards of God. It’s breaking God’s perfect and holy commandments. It’s rebellion against God. Sin is cosmic treason against the King of the Universe. We were made to live for the glory of God and the honor of his name. We were made to bring him pleasure. Yet each one of us has rejected that purpose and has chosen to live our own way, according to our own desires. Romans 3:23 tells us that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” All of us have failed to glorify God in the way that he deserves. He is an infinitely glorious God, worthy of our highest praise and passionate allegiance. We have given him neither. Instead we spat in God’s face and spent our passions on sinful, ungodly pleasures. Because God is holy and just, he can’t allow such heinous rebellion to go unpunished. He has decreed that the punishment for sin is eternal spiritual death. Those who reject God will spend a blistering eternity in hell, under the wrath of God, receiving the just punishment for their crimes.

Scripture tells us that in addition to being under the wrath of God, we are also slaves to the power of sin. Ephesians 2:1 describes
us as being “dead in . . . trespasses and sins,” and Titus 3:3 says of us, “For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another.” We don’t live in a way that glorifies God, nor do we desire to do so. Those who are slaves of sin can’t glorify God. They don’t even want to glorify God.

**BROKEN CISTERNs**

It gets worse. Scripture tells us that not only have we committed cosmic treason, but we have also forsaken the fountain of living water. In Jeremiah 2:12–13 we read, “Be appalled, O heavens, at this; be shocked, be utterly desolate, declares the **Lord**, for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water.” Sin is forsaking God, the beautiful fountain of living waters, for putrid, muddy, briny water. It’s like choosing to eat maggot-infested bread instead of filet mignon. It’s as if someone offered us the crown jewels of England and instead we chose a twenty-five-cent trinket from a vending machine. It’s irrational. It’s foolish. It shocks and appalls the heavens. Sin is utterly wicked. By choosing sin over God we are saying that it’s better and more satisfying than God. This is the ultimate lie. God is the sum of all excellent things. He alone can truly satisfy our hungry souls. To say that he’s anything less is a grievous insult and the height of wickedness. He must punish such ungodliness. This is a massive problem.

**THE SOLUTION**

But there is a solution to our problem, and his name is Jesus Christ. God the Father sent his Son Jesus to do what we could never do.
A Life for the Glory of God

He sent Jesus to live a life of perfect obedience to the law of God. Every thought he ever had, every word he ever spoke, every deed he ever performed brought honor and glory to God. He was perfect in every sense of the word. If anyone had the right to stand before God’s throne and say, “I deserve to be rewarded for my obedience,” it was Jesus. Then he did the unimaginable. Jesus didn’t claim the reward that his perfect obedience deserved. Instead he chose to die a bloody and shameful death on a splintered piece of wood. As he was hanging on the cross, something absolutely astonishing took place: Jesus was punished for our sins. Second Corinthians 5:21 tells us, “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

God the Father looked on God the Son as if he had committed our sins. Then the Father poured out his furious wrath on Jesus, crushing him for our sins. Every perverted thought we ever had, every prideful boast we ever made, every venomous word we ever spoke was laid upon Jesus. He took it all, receiving the full hatred of God toward those sins. He completely drained the cup of God’s wrath.

Now if we come to God in repentance we can be forgiven of every sin we ever committed or will commit. The unbearable weight of our sins will be removed, and God will credit Jesus’ perfect life to us. God will look upon us as if we had never sinned and always perfectly obeyed him. It’s an exchange of our sins for Christ’s righteousness. God strips us of our filthy rags of sin and wraps us in white robes of righteousness. What a blessed exchange this is!

We who receive Christ’s righteousness also receive new spiritual life. Like flowers blooming in a barren wasteland, new desires spring up in our once spiritually dead hearts, desires to please God and obey him. This change is described in Ephesians 2:4–5, which says, “But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich
Game Day for the Glory of God

in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in
transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved” (NIV). Our
relationship to God also changes. Before salvation we are enemies
of God and under his wrath. After salvation, God adopts us as his
children and gives us all the privileges of being sons and daughters
of God. What incredible mercy he pours out on us!

This is the foundation of living a life that glorifies God. The
gospel of Jesus Christ is what makes it possible for us to glorify and
please God in all that we do. Those who aren’t reconciled to God
cannot obey him. Romans 8:8 says, “Those who are in the flesh
cannot please God.” The gospel brings forgiveness and new life to
our souls, and it empowers us to live in a way that glorifies God.

Throughout the remainder of this book we will be trying to
answer the question of how we can enjoy sports for the glory of
God. As we take a deeper look we will be made keenly aware of
how often we fail to bring God glory. It’s at this point that we must
return again to the sweet news of the gospel and remember that
our acceptance with God is based solely on what Jesus Christ has
accomplished. Only then will we have the strength and the cour-
age to confront our failures and seek to change. Only then will we
be able to truly glorify God in all of life.