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PRINCE VERSUS KING

John 14:28-31

This has been a difficult year for Laurie and me, the hardest we have had in a long time. Just about a year ago I began receiving treatments for cancer. This made for a prolonged season of uncertainty, fear and difficulty. The first few months the treatments had such significant side effects there was concern with whether I could endure it. I remember one day when I said to Laurie, “There’s no way I can survive a whole year like this.” I felt terrible. Fortunately after about 3 months the side effects became tolerable. Still, they never completely disappeared. So while I have tolerated the treatments well, I had days periodically where I just did not feel good and I have experienced weakness and fatigue pretty much all year. Added to that there has been the effect of spending a day every 3 or 4 weeks at the cancer center receiving infusions. That alone is a tiring ordeal that has a discouraging effect.

Laurie and I were greatly encouraged a few months back when my doctor told me that I would have my last infusion in September. I also found out that the last step in my treatment would be surgery on my thyroid glad about a week after my last infusion. I would have to recover from that surgery, but that meant that by October I would be all done and mostly recovered. How do you celebrate the end of nearly a year of cancer treatments and the fact that, as my doctor said, cancer would no longer be running my life? We had airline credit for a round trip flight to Hawaii that would expire at the end of October. So our plan was to celebrate by going to the island of Kauai for 9 days. We were going to rejoice in no more cancer treatments by swimming, snorkeling, hiking, playing and relaxing in that beautiful spot. We had great hopes for that vacation.

Our second day on the island Laurie had a terrible headache and spent a good part of that day lying in our darkened hotel room trying to get over it. Things went down hill from there. The headache got better, but the next day she felt worse. Her body ached all over and her throat became terribly sore. I followed suit not long after that. We didn’t know it for several days, but we learned when we took tests that we both had covid. We had it the rest of our time there. We got to celebrate the end of cancer treatments by spending basically the entire time we were in Hawaii in our hotel room feeling miserable with covid.

We went through 3 and a half years of the world wide pandemic and never got covid. Most people we knew got it at some point but we did not. Then, when we had the opportunity to rejoice in the end of cancer treatments, we got covid. The medical people would describe what we had as a mild case of the disease. By mild they mean it didn’t threaten our lives and put us in the hospital. I think they need some different terminology. Our symptoms were anything but mild. Calling them mild would be like saying it gets mildly warm in Bakersfield in August. Among other things I had the worst sore throat I’ve ever had in my life. Yeah, it was delightful. Our great end of treatment celebration would have had to improve dramatically to qualify as a dumpster fire.

Does it ever seem to you like there is an inherent perversity to life? After one of the most trying, tiring years of my life, we had the opportunity to really rejoice, and life said, “Not so fast, Mr. and Mrs. Myatt.” Who has not at some point said, “Why do things like this happen to me?” Most of us have had that sense that the tide of life is running against us all too often. A friend once said to us, “Remind me never to go on vacation with you guys” because we have had so many mishaps on trips. One friend informed us he was checking the weather service the week before we went to see if a tropical storm or hurricane was heading for Hawaii while we would be there. We have had some travel misadventures, to be sure. But this was the grand prize winner, by far the worst ever. Life can just be perverse I tell you.

This is reflected in the widely acknowledged principle known as Murphy’s Law. If anything can go wrong, it will. Yeah, why is that? Why is life like that? That law has given rise to corollaries, including, “Nothing is as easy as it looks, everything takes longer than you think, and if there is a possibility of several things going wrong, the one that will cause the most damage will be the one to go wrong.” At it’s most extreme we can see the perversity of life in what is happening in the world. Look at Ukraine and Gaza. Does this make sense? People are killing eac other and destroying things. Is this a good way to deal with differences? It is crazy. Why do things like this keep happening after centuries of fighting? Life is this way in part because there is something out there doing everything it can to make life difficult for us. Jesus gave us a reminder of that reality in John 14:28-31.

JESUS WAS GOING TO THE FATHER

Jesus told his disciples they were focused on the wrong things. They were feeling sorry for themselves. Jesus said if they really did love him, if they cared about him, they would be glad that Jesus was going away because he was going to the Father. His reason why they would be glad though is not totally clear, and it has been the cause of a lot of discussion and controversy for centuries. He said they would be glad for him because “the Father is greater than I.” That sounds like he’s saying that God the Father is more powerful, more awesome, a greater being than Jesus. Is Jesus at best some kind of lesser God than the Father, and at worst, not divine at all?

Remember what Jesus has said earlier. He said he and the Father are one and that anyone who has seen him has seen the Father. In chapter 8 he had said, “Before Abraham was, I am.” We saw that was a clear claim to be God. Jesus’ audiences understood those kinds of statements to be an assertion that he was divine. Paul wrote in Colossians 2:9 that the fullness of God existed in Jesus, meaning he was all that God is. So that leaves us with the enigma of what Jesus meant. It also begs the question, whatever Jesus meant, why would the disciples be glad for Jesus that he was going to the Father?

Jesus has said repeatedly that he was sent by the Father, that he only did what the Father told him to do and said what the Father gave him to say. In Philippians 2:6 Paul wrote that Jesus “did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage.” That means he had equality with God. Yet in verse 7 he took “the very nature of a servant.” In verse 8 Paul wrote he humbled himself by “becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.”

So Jesus has equality with God, is fully God, but somehow takes a subservient position to God the Father. In a way that is not possible for us to parse out, God is one being, but three persons, and in that incomprehensible nature Jesus, the Son, serves the will of the Father. In that sense the Father is greater.

Consider our son in law, Michael. He was in the Marines for 13 years, ending up as a captain. He had officers who were over him throughout his years in the Marines. He was required to obey their orders. He took a subservient role. So here’s the question: did that make him less of a human being than his superior officers? Of course not. They might have been “greater” than him, but that did not make them more of a human being than Michael. Similarly, Jesus, the Son, obeyed the Father, but that did not make him less of God than the Father.

Why would it have been better for Jesus to go back to the Father? That’s not too hard to figure out. The Father and the Son have a perfect love relationship. It was hard for Jesus to be separated from the Father because they loved each other. Jesus looked forward to being reunited with the Father. Jesus went from being in the Father’s presence, sharing in his glory, to living in a broken world among fallen people, being ignored, mistreated, rejected and tortured to death. Going back to the Father meant immeasurably better circumstances. For Jesus, life was about to get far better. He just had to get through the crucifixion.

Our daughter, Carissa, grew up here in coastal San Diego County. She and Michael got married back in February, 2013. At the end of that year they moved to Meridien, Mississippi. Michael was assigned to be a flight instructor at Meridien Naval Air Station. They lived there for a little over 3 years. At the end of that time when Michael got out of the Marines they moved back to the San Diego region. There were some things about that move that were hard. They had a great community of very good friends in Meridien. They bonded with many of Michael’s fellow flight instructors and their wives. It was sad for them to move away from all the great friends they had made. Carissa and Michael made the most of their time in Meridien, but I can assure you that both of them, but especially Carissa, looked forward eagerly to going back home. She wasn’t crazy about the culture in Mississippi, and she certainly was not a fan of the weather. Not long before they moved a tornado ripped through town just a few miles from their house. Leaving all that to go back home was cause for great joy for Carissa. Jesus’ going back to the Father was inconceivably better for him that coming back home was for Carissa.

Jesus’ disciples were distraught because they were thinking about themselves. They weren’t loving Jesus. If their main motivation was love for Jesus they would have been saying, “Man, we hate that you’re leaving, Jesus, because being without you is going to be terrible. But we’re really happy for you. We know life will be way better for you and we’re thrilled.” They didn’t say that because all they were thinking about was their own sadness. This is a reminder for us that we have a tendency to do the same thing. We get obsessed with ourselves and what we think we want rather than thinking about God’s glory and his plan. If we were more focused on God’s plan and his glory, then we would be much better at dealing with the setbacks and losses that come our way.

THE PRINCE OF THE WORLD WAS COMING

John Duewel sent us a picture of one of those classic church signs. This one read, “Prophecy class cancelled due to unforeseen circumstances.” Talk about irony. Jesus wanted his followers to know that none of what was about to happen was an unforeseen circumstance for him. He knew what was about to happen.

For Jesus, returning to the Father was a wonderful thing. However, the process of going back to the father was going to be the opposite of wonderful. It was going to be horrifying. Jesus knew that. He described what was about to happen to him as the prince of the world coming. Who was this prince? Isn’t Jesus supposed to be the king of kings?

In Ephesians 1:21 Paul said that Jesus is “far above all rule and authority, power and dominion…not only in the present age, but also in the one to come.” In verse 22 he said God “placed all things under his feet.” He said Jesus is the head over everything. This is true right now, in this age. Jesus is in charge. He is the ruler of all. Wouldn’t that make him the ruler of this age, the prince of the world? Yes, it would. So what did he mean when he talked about the prince of the world coming?

This is a reference to Satan. In 1 John 5:19 John said “the whole world lies in the power of the evil one.” Even Jesus referred earlier in John 12:31 to Satan as the ruler of this world. Paul referred to Satan in 2 Corinthians 4:4 as “the god of this age.” The Bible says Jesus is the ruler of all, and yet also says Satan is the ruler of this world, the god of this age, claiming the whole world lies in his power. So who’s in charge here? Is this one of those famous contradictions in the Bible?

Both of these things are true. Jesus is the ruler of all, but during this present age he has allowed Satan to lead a rebellion, and in his rebellion to oppose God and his work in this world. God has given Satan the freedom to fight against him and use his influence in this world, though within limits that God has set. Satan and his rebellion will not be allowed to continue forever. Jesus will come and put an end to it at some point in the future. But for now Satan’s revolt is causing havoc in this world.

One scholar described it this way: “Satan is the major influence on the ideals, opinions, goals, hopes and views of the majority of people. His influence encompasses the world’s philosophies, education and commerce.” Culture, which is the corporate creation of those ideals, opinions and philosophies, is actually controlled by Satan. That is true no matter where you go in the world. Culture is a result of the influence of Satan pretty much all over the world.

Satan is a bizarre creature. He opposes God and everything that God does. Somewhere in his thinking he is aware of who God is and knows that God is all powerful, thus cannot be defeated. Satan even knows he was created by God and his great power. Yet he has continued through thousands of years fighting against God in what is destined to be a futile attempt to overthrow him. This is the height of insanity. Colossians 1:16 says that in Christ all things are held together. It is God’s power that keeps the universe operating, that holds it together. Suppose Satan could somehow conquer God. If such a thing could happen it would spell the end, for Satan doesn’t have the almighty power to hold all things together. Maybe he doesn’t care. Perhaps the destruction of the universe would be a satisfying outcome for him because he is so filled with animus toward God that destroying his great creation would please him.

Why is Satan so irrational? Laurie and I have had to deal with a couple of people who were narcissistic. We realized they were their own worst enemies. They would do and say things that would blow up their own lives. They couldn’t see it because of their obsession with themselves. Satan is the ultimate narcissist. He is pure, unadulterated obsession with himself, and that keeps him from seeing the truth, making him irrational.

It is important to be aware of the fact that Satan opposes and tries to destroy everything God does. When Jesus said the prince of the world was coming, that’s what he meant. Satan knew who Jesus is. He knew why he had come into the world. But Satan is not omniscient. What Satan didn’t know was how Jesus was going to save the world. All he knew was that Jesus was a threat, so he had to be destroyed.

Satan is still at work. He is trying to oppose God and destroy his work at every turn. He is doing that in our lives. He is trying to do 2 things.

**Separate us from God**

Satan’s desire is to rip us away from God. We see that beginning with his first appearance in the Bible. He showed up in Genesis 3 telling Eve that she couldn’t trust God because he didn’t want her best. He was trying to get her to doubt God’s goodness and to rebel against him. He has continued to attempt that with every person throughout history. He is trying to do that in our lives right this minute.

He has a number of ways he tries to do that. One of them is by the method he used in Eden. He tries to convince us that real happiness and fulfillment is found in something that God might deny us. Especially he wants us to believe that knowing God and serving him is irrelevant at best to having what we want, and at worst it is a roadblock to it. God, he tells us, actually would keep us from what we want and need.

Many years ago there was a guy in our church at the time who I hoped would become a significant leader. He was a natural leader that people gravitated to. He had served in another church in some significant roles, and he was committed to serving Jesus. He was involved in several ministries, but then began to sort of back out of ministry roles. Word got around that he was having something of a faith crisis and was questioning some of the things he had believed. A number of guys met with him to help him work through his issues, but seemed to make no headway. Then, after some time had passed he just dropped out of sight. I learned that he had left his wife and children for another woman. It became obvious what his real issues were. He wanted to bail out on his wife and commit adultery with another woman, but there was no way he could continue to claim to serve Christ and do that. His faith condemned him. So he decided to get rid of his faith. If he no longer believed it then it could not make him feel guilty. Satan dangled something in front of him and told him it was the good thing he needed, that God not only wouldn’t give him what he needed, he would keep it from him. We shouldn’t be surprised if Satan tries the same thing on us.

Satan also uses the Job strategy. That involves throwing painful hardships, griefs and losses at us to try to convince us that God can’t be trusted. Satan’s plan was to get Job to do exactly what Job’s wife ultimately suggested to him, to curse God and die. It is easy in the midst of that kind of a campaign to not be aware of what is actually going on. When I was feeling terrible and couldn’t sleep in the middle of the night a week ago, and was frustrated knowing this was going to be what our vacation would consist of, it was easy to feel sorry for myself and forget that Satan was at work, and that what he wanted was precisely that I would feel sorry for myself and become irked at God for allowing this.

We need to open our eyes, to be aware. We can know that when we are discouraged, when we are hurting, when we are angry or bitter, Satan is lurking, seeing an opportunity. It will help us if we can remember that Satan is in those events and is trying to get us to quit trusting God.

**Destroy our lives**

Every human being is a work of God. We are all created by him in the image of Almighty God. Because he is so insanely opposed to God, Satan wants to destroy anything that has God’s name or mark associated with it. That means that Satan is bent on destroying our lives.

Again we can see that in his first appearance in the Bible in Genesis 3. Was Satan genuinely concerned that Adam and Eve were getting cheated by God? Did he think that God was keeping something wonderful from them? Did he think that he was giving them good advice that would enhance their lives if they heeded it? Satan knew God was not keeping something good from the humans. He knew exactly what was going to happen if they listened to Satan. He wanted them to experience the devastating effects of disobeying God. He was gleeful when they did.

Satan is trying to destroy us. That’s why his first priority is to distance us from God, because that is the best way to destroy us. We need to remember what Satan is up to, that what he is hoping is that we will listen to him and suffer the kind of fate that Adam and Eve and all of their descendants did.

How glad are you to live with the specter of death always lurking out there? How glad are you to experience the pains and losses of aging? How glad are you to live in a world where the common cold is all too common, where the flu strikes every year, where there is cancer, heart disease, diabetes, birth defects, multiple sclerosis, ALS disease and so many others? How happy are you that Covid is out there and is not going away? How do you like earthquakes and especially knowing that for decades they’ve been predicting the “Big One” is going to hit and wipe out California?

All of those things are results of the decision Adam and Eve made because they heeded Satan’s urging. I doubt Satan knew all the ramifications of that decision that would show up in the coming millenia, but he knew death would be a new normal for the humans, and that’s what he wanted.

We need to always remember that’s what he wants for us. Many years ago when I’d never heard of anything like this, I got a telephone call one day. It was from the IRS. The IRS agent informed me that due to errors we had made on our tax returns we owed the IRS several thousand dollars. He told me I needed to remit this money, and that if I didn’t they were going to take me to court. It really shook me. I said I needed to know what these supposed errors were. I couldn’t understand how we could have made such a bad mistake. I told him I needed an explanation. I don’t remember how he responded to that, but he told me he would call me back the next day. I was concerned about this so I went on line to find out what I could about this situation. In the process I found something on the IRS web site about scams, that told me the IRS would never call. They would send a letter. A call purporting to be from the IRS would be from a criminal trying to steal from me. The lights came on. This was a scam. This guy and whoever he worked for were trying to steal money from us. Armed with that knowledge do you think when he called back I listened to his advice? I knew he meant evil for me, not good, so there was no way I was going to trust him. Satan is the ultimate scam artist. He is out to destroy us.

SATAN HAD NO POWER OVER JESUS

Jesus made a profound statement at the end of verse 30. He said about the prince of this world, “He has no hold over me.” Satan has no power over Jesus. This is a crucial truth. If that’s true, why was Satan able to cause Jesus to be tortured and killed? Jesus said it was, “so that the world may learn that I love the Father and do exactly what my Father has commanded me.” The Father sent Jesus to ransom the lost, and that required the horrific sacrifice he made. By going through that it was obvious that Jesus did whatever was required to fulfill his mission that the Father had given him.

There is a powerful message for us in that. It is a challenge for us to do the same, to also do whatever the Father commands us. But there is also tremendous encouragement for us in this. Satan was only able to bring those terrible events about because Jesus let him. Had Jesus not allowed it, none of it would have happened. Satan is clever and powerful, but he has no power over Jesus whatsoever.

It is crucial that we remember this truth. Satan has exactly zero power over Jesus. In 1 John 4:4 we read, “You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.” Yes, the prince of this world is still coming after God’s people. He is clever and he is strong. But he is not all knowing and he is not all powerful. The one who is in you, the Spirit of Jesus Christ, is far more powerful than he is. Satan has no power over you.

Well that means he can never do anything against us, that he can’t hurt us, right? Well, did it mean that for Jesus? Uh oh. It obviously did not. The evil one hurt him badly. But he did not destroy him and he did not defeat him. Jesus told his disciples specifically in this passage that the Father’s will and plan was to allow Satan to do him great harm. It would seem likely if that was the case for God’s Son, it might be for us as well.

But why would God have a plan that might result in us experiencing Satan’s work, causing us great pain? The heart of the answer to that question is, “I don’t know.” Any question that starts why would God, likely will have “I don’t know” as the answer. Ask Job about that. If you could talk to him today and ask him why God let all those terrible things happen to him, he would say, “I don’t know. I just know that I needed to trust him.”

There are some things we can know. Two psychologists, Adam Alter and Daniel Oppenheimer discovered something that may play a role in why God lets Satan cause problems at times. A Yale professor named Shane Frederick created a test called the Cognitive Reflection Test. It consists of only 3 questions, yet it has proven to be an accurate measure of intelligence equal to much more extensive tests. I’ll give you a sample of two of its questions. A bat and a ball cost $1.10 in total. The bat costs $1 more than the ball. How much does the ball cost? The second question is, it takes 5 machines 5 minutes to make 5 widgets. How long will it take 100 machines to make 100 widgets?

The answers are not what instinct tells us. We instinctually think the ball costs 10 cents. But that’s not right. If it costs 10 cents and the bat is a dollar more, the bat costs $1.10 with the total being $1.20. So the ball costs 5 cents, the bat is $1.05 and the total is $1.10. With the machines if it takes 5 machines 5 minutes to make 5 widgets, the machines are each making a widget in 5 minutes. So if you have 100 machines it will take 5 minutes for them to make 100.

Now it gets interesting. Alder and Oppenheimer gave the test to students at Princeton University and they got an average of 1.9 answers correct. That’s pretty good since the all time high was an average of 2.18 by students at MIT. Then they gave another group of students at Princeton the test, only it was printed in a light gray, 10 point font, making it hard to read. This time the students averaged 2.45 answers correct. By making the questions harder to read they improved the students’ score by almost 30%! Sometimes when things are harder it actually enables us to do better. God sometimes has us go through hard things because it makes us stronger and better.

I have pointed out numerous times that according to 2 Corinthians 4:7-9 we display the power of God by being squeezed, pressed down, afflicted, and continue to trust God. In other words, by displaying the fruit of the Spirit in the midst of hard times we have a powerful testimony that impacts people.

IMPLICATIONS

KNOW THAT THE ENEMY IS COMING

I wish life was like a nice day at the beach. It’s beautiful and fun and restful. But in some ways it is going to be more like a day at Omaha Beach on D Day. It is a battle zone. Satan came after Jesus hard, and he’s going to come after us. Life isn’t all bad. But the enemy is going to do everything he can to separate us from God and destroy us. We need to be aware and not be surprised when it happens.

RECOGNIZE HIS ATTACKS

One of the worst things we can do is to not understand what is going on. We need to remember what Satan’s tactics are. He lies to us, he lures us, tempts us, he tries to get us to doubt God, he tries to batter us with difficulty, hardship, pain and loss. He tries to distract us. We need to recognize what is going on and see what he is up to. This enables us to understand and respond.

I was watching a football game between the San Francisco 49ers and the Dallas Cowboys. Early on San Francisco was dominating the game, but a few crucial mistakes had kept them from pulling away. They were only leading 7-0 despite having totally controlled the game. But then around mid field they snapped the ball to quarterback Brock Purdy who handed it off to running back Christian McCaffrey who was running to the right. It looked like a sweep to the right. But wait, wide receiver Deebo Samuel, who had been split out wide to the right, was running back to the left and McCaffrey pitched the ball to him. It was a reverse! With the defense all moving to defend against the run to their left, suddenly Samuel had the ball going in the opposite direction. It was misdirection intended to catch the defense off guard and out of position. But wait, no it wasn’t. For very quickly Samuel pitched the ball back to Purdy, who was standing, seemingly out of the play. Purdy fired a pass deep down the field to a wide open receiver who took it in for a long touchdown. Not realizing what was really happening, the defenders had moved up to try to stop the running play, only to discover they had been tricked and had left a man wide open.

That’s what’s going to happen to us. When we are hurting, confused, disappointed, tempted by something we think we really want it is easy to not see what is actually going on. It is easy to miss that the evil one is at work and is try to destroy us. This is critical. We must see his hand at work, and we must never forget that he is trying to destroy us.

My brother Jerry had cataract surgery on one of his eyes recently. He said his vision is much better. Marty told me when he had similar surgery he was amazed at how much better he saw. Everything was brighter. He was seeing the world as it really is. That’s a bit like knowing what Satan is up to. It enables us to see what’s really going on and why things happen to us. It helps us understand and respond.

RELY AND RESIST

Remember who is in you. The Spirit of Christ is in you, and he is greater than the one who is in the world. Once you see what is going on, depend upon him. Ask Jesus to control you and give you strength. Put your faith in him and in the Holy Spirit to enable you to stand. Then stand firm.

Jesus has power over Satan. There’s an important truth revealed by what Satan did to Jesus. He knew who Jesus was and he knew he was on the planet to rescue humans and bring them into God’s kingdom. He aimed to prevent Jesus from doing that. So he maneuvered people and events to stop Jesus by killing him. Satan is not all knowing. He doesn’t know the future. There is a crucial truth here. Satan did not know what the outcome of killing Jesus would be. He thought he had won when Jesus was killed. He did not know that Jesus’ death would be the instrument of grace for all human beings, the key to them entering the kingdom of God, nor did he know about Jesus’ resurrection. He somehow missed it when Jesus talked about his dying, just like Jesus’ disciples did. In other words, for all his cleverness and power, he cooked up a scheme that ended up being the biggest blow to his own efforts of all time. What he did in an effort to defeat God was the very thing that accomplished God’s plan to save people, and he never saw it coming. Satan will try some dastardly things in our lives, but he doesn’t know what will happen, and it is likely that often his efforts will backfire on him, just like they did with Jesus. This is helpful for us to remember, because it gives us hope. Never forget that Satan is fallible and is not all knowing.

So James 4:7 tells us, “Resist the devil and he will flee from you.” This is great news. He’s a paper tiger. He looks scary, he blusters and roars and tries to intimidate us, and it often works. But if we will resist, stand firm, trusting in the Holy Spirit, he will tuck his tail between his legs and run. Yes, Satan may, for now, be the prince of this world. But Jesus is the King. Never, ever forget that,