THAT DOG CAN’T BITE

Hebrews 2:14

One frustrating and annoying effect of the last two years of pandemic has been the proliferation of conspiracy theories. We’ve heard all kinds of wild talk. You might have heard people say that doctors have been falsely assigning all kinds of deaths to covid to make it seem deadlier than it actually is. This is all part of some plot to make the pandemic seem like a big deal and to frighten people and control them. This, it is typically claimed, is usually a plot of the government or big pharma. Laurie and I have a bone to pick with this one. Our son is an emergency physician who has been on the front line of the Covid battle for the entire pandemic. He has more first hand experience with it than anyone you know. He will tell you that this is absolute hogwash. Sadly he witnessed the deaths of many people to covid, and he can tell you it was no hoax and it was no conspiracy. And no, they are not injecting you with microscopic transmitters in the Covid vaccine that connect to the 5G network so the NSA or Bill Gates can track your movements.

Conspiracy theories have always been around. One of the most famous conspiracy theories is that in 1947 a UFO crashed not far from Roswell, New Mexico, and the government quickly recovered the debris from the downed spacecraft, including the dead bodies of aliens, and has covered up the truth ever since. The Air Force put out a story that what crashed there was a weather balloon along with its instruments. The theorists scoff. On rare occasions conspiracy theories have a germ of truth. The Roswell story is a case in point. It came out nearly 50 years later that the Air Force did, in fact, cover up what happened there. But it wasn’t a UFO that crashed. It actually was a high altitude balloon. But it was part of a secret project whose purpose was to find a way to monitor Soviet nuclear tests using such balloons. Remember that was long before satellites or the SR71 spy plane or the U2 airplane. They said it was a weather balloon because they wanted to keep the project secret. There were no alien bodies and no spacecraft.

A number of years ago I had a conversation with a neighbor in which he expressed his certainty that there are shadowy wealthy and powerful people who are controlling events in the world and manipulating them to their advantage, to the harm of the little guy like us. He was vague about who these people are, but he was quite sure that they are at work in our world. Many have felt that there is at least some truth to my neighbor’s claims. It feels like there are forces working against us, that somehow life is rigged, and it’s not in our favor. This is actually true, but not the way the conspiracy theorists typically would have it.

Today we celebrate Easter, the day of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. I’ve preached a lot of Easter sermons. But there is one aspect of the significance of the death and resurrection of Jesus that I have not addressed before. Today I am going to focus on that important effect of what Jesus did so long ago.

There is, indeed, a conspiracy afoot, but it is not of human origin. Ah, so you think aliens are at work among us. Well, yes, in a sense, but I don’t mean extra-terrestrial beings. The beings are not of this world, but they are spiritual, not physical. Ephesians 6:12 says, “Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.” The Bible claims that there is a cosmic battle being waged in the spiritual realm, one we cannot see or hear, but that this conflict has very real impact on this world and on our lives.

This is not the stuff of movies where demons can physically kill us or maim us. It is not, at least in our culture, even about people being “possessed” by demons. It is about these spiritual forces using circumstances in this world to derail our lives, to separate us from God, to cause us to be defeated, discouraged, and to ruin our lives. Writer John Eldredge said, “We are now in the late stages of the long and vicious war against the human heart…the story of your life is the story of the long and brutal assault on your heart by the one who knows what you could be, and fears it.”

The Bible tells us this war has been going on throughout human history. Almost as soon as God created human beings Satan shows up seeking to foul up what God has done. Much later God enters human history as a baby, seeking to rescue the human race. Satan tries to thwart that plan through the violent, paranoid machinations of Herod, who orders all the baby boys in Bethlehem killed. Jesus dodges that bullet, and years later launches his public ministry. At the very beginning of it while he is alone in the wilderness Satan tries to divert him from his mission by way of temptation. This pattern continues to this day.

Think about how life is. Is doing what you know is good, what will draw you to God, what will bring good to other people, what will make for the healthiest, life you can live, the path of least resistance? Or do you find that the path of least resistance is almost always to do things that are not life building? Think of the physical arena. Which is easier, to work out or to sit on the couch, to eat broccoli or to eat ice cream? Why is it that the things that make for a better life are usually harder to do?

We can see the effects of the spiritual war on people. There is so much pain, so much ugliness in the world. In his book, *Spirit Warriors*, Stu Weber says he lives in a very nice, middle class neighborhood. Nice homes, typical families, no ghetto, a very pleasant, safe place to live. He says he just took note of what has happened in the homes right around his house. Next door a friend was dying of cancer. Up the street there had been a teenage suicide. Another home was missing a father because he was in prison. Yet another family was dealing with incest and sexual abuse charges. As I was thinking about this I reflected on some of our kids’ friends. There was a guy on Toby’s high school hockey team, a kid I coached, who was a wonderful young man and a terrific hockey player. I was stunned when I learned several years ago that he had died from cancer. He was way too young. Toby had two friends from high school that had accidents that resulted in them being paralyzed. Our kids had another friend whose husband died of Covid this year. These are all young people! This world is full of grief.

Everything we decide to do that moves in the direction of knowing God and obeying him will be resisted. Even just going to church or a Bible study, you will find there will be something that tells you to just skip it. It is easier not to go than to go. There is an enemy who is opposing us. He wants to rupture any potential connection you might have to God. You see that in Eden when he fouled up the first humans. You see it in the book of Job when he tries every crummy thing he can think of to make Job’s life a living hell in hopes of getting the poor man to give up on God. He despises humans because they are made in God’s image and can be his beloved children. So he tries to ruin our lives. He tries to get us to make bad choices. He wants us to have lives full of fear, stress, emptiness, anger and bitterness, so he does whatever he can to cause us those terrible results.

At this point you may be thinking, “Hey, it’s Easter Sunday. What does this have to do with Easter?” Easter is crucial in this spiritual war.

THE WAR HAS BEEN WON

Hebrews 2:14 says, “Since the children have flesh and blood, he (Jesus Christ) too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death, that is, the devil.” The climactic battle happened 2000 years ago when Jesus was nailed to a cross. By his death and resurrection he broke the power of our enemy.

In Genesis 3:15 after Satan had duped the first humans into making the most catastrophic decision in human history, God said to him, “I will put enmity between you and the woman and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.” This is a statement that at some point a descendant of Eve would strike Satan on the head, a killing blow, though Satan would strike Eve’s descendant on the heel, a wounding, but not fatal blow. Theologians see this as a reference to Christ. Yes, Satan inflicted enormous pain on him, but he defeated Satan on that cross. John 12:27 says in the final days before his ordeal Jesus said, “Now my soul is troubled.” He knew what was coming, and it felt awful. My guess is it made him feel sick right down to his soul. But in verse 31 he said, “Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out.” What was going to happen to Jesus was unimaginably gruesome, but it was also the thing that defeated the prince of this world, meaning Satan. Colossians 2:15 says of Jesus, “Having disarmed the rulers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by cross.” Paul was referring to rulers and authorities in the spiritual realm, in other words, Satan and his allies. Jesus’ death was a fatal blow to them. Their power was broken for good.

Jesus’ resurrection was crucial to that victory. If Jesus just died and that was the end, then there would have been no victory. It would have been just another defeat. Satan, who has the power of death, would have exercised that power over Jesus, end of story. Satan wins again. Romans 1:4 in the New American Standard translation says Jesus was “declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead.” Jesus made the claim to be God in human form and said he would back up that claim by defeating death. Had he just died and that was the end, he would obviously not have been who he said he was.

Had Jesus not been God in human form, then his death meant nothing more than the death of any other human being. It was tragic, for sure, but that’s all. But the resurrection meant his death was tragic, but also triumphant, for it means God is real. He intervenes in our world. He loves us enough to go to extreme lengths to rescue us. He made a way for us to be reunited with him when no other such way exists. Furthermore, his resurrection means he has defeated death and guarantees that we shall do the same. Death is one of Satan’s most powerful weapons, and by his resurrection Jesus has removed its sting.

Oh brother. First you tell me some fairy tale about the devil and evil spirits making life difficult for us. Now you expect me to believe a myth about some ancient guy dying and coming back to life? Come on, dude, time to live in the real world. How can you believe that? People do not come back to life after they have died.

That’s right, people don’t. No one has that kind of power. With one exception. Jesus claimed he was God in human form. What must you do to back up that claim? If I said among my many impressive abilities, I can juggle, wouldn’t your response be, “Prove it”? Wouldn’t you insist I show you? Well juggling wouldn’t back up Jesus’ claim. The only way to do that was for him to do something impossible, something that no human could ever do. Since death is our biggest enemy, defeating it would be the proof of Jesus’ identity.

The evidence that Jesus did come back to life is extensive. For instance, how did the church ever get started? One historian pointed out that within about a hundred years on either side of Jesus’ life there were as many as 15 other self proclaimed Messiahs. Here’s a quiz. Name one. They all got their little following, then they died, and their movement was over. Why didn’t that happen with Jesus? How does he have 2 billion followers now 2000 years later?

Ancient Jews had such reverence for God that they would not even pronounce his Hebrew name. To worship anyone or anything other than God was the worst of all possible sins. How do you explain the fact that within weeks after the death of Jesus thousands of ancient Jews, many of whom had previously rejected him, were worshiping him as God?

Well this was just a legend that grew up over a long time. It was hundreds of years before people claimed Jesus rose from the dead. Wrong again, my friend. I’ve got one name for you. Paul. This former Jesus hater and persecutor of Christians made a total 180, and became the world’s most passionate promoter of Jesus. He said it happened because he saw the risen Jesus. He was proclaiming Jesus risen from the dead only 5 years after Jesus’ death and resurrection. There is no denying this. It’s historical fact. You can’t say it was a legend that grew up many years later. Undisputed history simply won’t allow it.

Years ago I had a conversation with a guy who claimed that he only believed in science. I brought up the resurrection in the conversation and related some of the evidence for it. He said, “No matter what evidence you claim, I will never believe in a man coming back from the dead unless I see it with my eyes.” After considering that, I asked him if he believed in spontaneous generation, meaning life suddenly popping into being from non-life. He was a bit caught off guard by the sudden change in topic, but he said, “No. Science has proven can’t happen.” I said, “Do you believe in evolution as the vehicle responsible for the existence of human beings?” He said yes. So I said, “Is it not the case that in that theory at some point life arose from non-life?” He explained about billions of years and just the right conditions and so on. I said, “Yes, I know all that, but at the end of the day, somewhere in there that which was not alive produced life, if that theory is correct.” He said, “Well, yes, I suppose that’s true.” So I said, “And you believe that?” He admitted he did. So I asked, “Have you ever seen that happen?” He admitted he had not. I then said, “So you believe in something that you admit is impossible, even though you have never seen it with your own eyes.” He said, “Well, the evidence.” I interrupted him and said, “No, no, you can’t say that. You said no matter what the evidence you couldn’t believe in the resurrection unless you saw it with your own eyes because it is impossible. And yet in this case you believe in something that is impossible even though you’ve never seen it, because you believe the evidence for it. That seems inconsistent, don’t you think? Wouldn’t you say that to be objective you ought to consider the evidence?” He grudgingly admitted he probably should, but it was clear that he had no intention of doing so. He didn’t really want to know the truth.

So the Bible claims that Jesus defeated Satan. And yet, we still see the spiritual battle going on. We still see the damage in people’s lives. We still feel the opposition and its effects in our own lives. How does this help us?

APPLICATION

RECOGNIZE THE ENEMY’S TACTICS

First, know that the enemy lies. In John 8:44 Jesus said when he lies he is speaking his native language. How do you know the devil is lying? His lips are moving. In fact, Jesus said that he is the father of lies. Never forget everything that comes from him is a lie.

His lies tend to take 3 forms. Temptation is one of them. Before Jesus began his ministry he spent 6 weeks in Bakersfield. Oh, no, wait, he was in the wilderness. He had nothing to eat for those weeks. He was hungry. I’m pretty sure he must have been on the edge of being seriously hangry. Satan showed up tempting him. He subtly tried to tell Jesus, “What the Father is supplying isn’t enough. You need to take care of yourself, because the Father won’t.”

This is the lie he’s going to use on you. The job you have is not enough, the money you have is not enough, the friends you have are not enough, the husband you have is not enough, the sex you have is not enough, the happiness you have is not enough. So you need to do whatever is necessary to get more, because you need this. Do whatever you have to in order to get what you need.

Fear is another of Satan’s tactics, a big tool of the enemy. Repeatedly God says to us in the Bible, “Do not be afraid.” Satan continually says, “Be afraid. Be very afraid. Be afraid of everything and everyone.”

Discouragement is one of the enemy’s classic lies. He is going to beat you up and tell you that there is no hope. You might as well quit right now. God has abandoned you. He’s not looking out for you. This was the tactic he used against Job. He was certain if he could make things tough enough for Job he would lose hope, quit trusting God and Satan would win. Satan is also called the accuser because he loves to accuse Jesus followers of being phony, of not measuring up, of being unacceptable to God. He hopes to bury us with discouragement.

Discouragement is a powerful thing. When Toby was 8 years old he started playing hockey. His dad coached a number of his youth hockey teams. The first couple of teams he played on were pretty good. Then came a new season and a new team. The first practice for this new team I knew we were in trouble. Toby was a very good player, but he was the only one on this team. Somehow a random draw of players ended up putting the hockey equivalent of the Bad News Bears together. Toby was the only one on the team who could even skate well. I tried to help them, but we only had one practice a week and there wasn’t much I could do. The first game went predictably poorly. We lost, and it wasn’t close. The next week was worse, a true blowout loss. After the third straight loss I noticed we had fewer kids show up for practice. Each week after another loss the number of kids coming to practice would get a little smaller. They also began to quit showing up for games. By the end of the season we almost had to forfeit because we barely had enough kids to play. The coach can say, “This is about having fun and improving our skills, not about the score or who wins the game” all he wants. The kids know better. The losing brings discouragement. It’s not fun. And one by one as they got discouraged the kids gave up. That is what Satan wants to do to us. He wants us to believe the lie that God isn’t interested, he doesn’t care about us, there is no hope for us, so why even try?

REMEMBER JESUS HAS WON

The message of Easter is that Jesus has defeated the enemy. I know, you’re probably thinking, “It doesn’t feel like it. I still feel the attacks of the enemy. He still seems to be active and fighting.” Steve Poe tells a story in his book, *Creatures Of Habit*, that is helpful here. When he was a boy, he and several of his friends would walk to school together every day. Their route to school took them past a particular house that was something of a problem for them. An old man lived in the house, and he had a dog. This dog was a big boxer. He looked intimidating and he had a terrifying bark. Every time they would walk by the house this dog would go into a barking fit. He would dash toward the boys blasting out ear-splitting barks that seemed to paralyze them. The only thing that saved them was the dog was on a chain, and the chain would stop him from getting to them. But they were petrified in fear that the chain might somehow break. They imagined if that beast ever got free the mayhem he would unleash on them would be painful and maybe even deadly. One day as they were about to endure the dog’s onslaught once again, the old man came out of the house. He called to them, “Hey, boys, come over here for a moment.” They wanted no part of that. What was this old man going to do to them? But he insisted, “Come on over, I want to show you something.” To come over to him was to get within the dog’s range, but the old man grabbed the chain and got control of him. So reluctantly they walked over to the man and his terrifying dog. The man said to them, “Here’s what I want you to see. You don’t need to be afraid of my dog. He may look and sound scary, but he’s not.” He opened the dog’s mouth and said, “See, he has no teeth.” Sure enough, there was not a single tooth in the dog’s mouth. Talk about his bark being worse than his bite. He didn’t even have a bite! From that moment on they never again were afraid of the dog. He could bark all he wanted, but they knew he was no threat.

Satan is like that dog. He has a vicious sounding bark. But that’s all he’s got. He is no threat to us. We don’t need to fear him. We don’t need to give in to his lies. When Jesus died on that cross and then came out of that tomb, it was like he removed the teeth from Satan. We need to remember he is toothless against us. He is already defeated, and he has no power against us. His accusations against us are a joke, because Jesus’ death and resurrection mean we are loved and accepted by God regardless of our flaws and failures. That question is settled, and any concern we have about being loved by God is over. On the cross Jesus said, “It is finished” and he meant it.

There is a terrible war going on in Ukraine. But what if all of the weapons of Mr. Putin’s forces, all the rifles, machine guns, artillery, could only fire blanks. They could look intimidating, they could make terrible noises and frighten people, but they couldn’t actually do any damage. That’s what our enemy is like. He can make scary noise, but he can’t actually harm us unless we fall for his tricks.

There is no need to fear. In John 17:15 Jesus prayed for his disciples and ultimately for us these words. “My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one.” Here’s my question: do you think the Father answers Jesus’ prayers? Um, yes, I guess he does. Then do you think the Father will protect you from the evil one? Yes, I suppose so. There is nothing left to be afraid of. That toothless dog can’t do a thing to you.

Laurie and I have had a lot of opportunity to take care of our little grandson, Wesley. He is a terrific little guy who is loads of fun. But he’s two, which means he is a disaster looking for some place to happen. He doesn’t realize at times that he is putting himself in a precarious situation where he could get hurt. He is also still a toddler who can trip over seemingly nothing at all. When I am watching him, I am hypersensitive to the possibilities of Wesley getting hurt. Often he will put himself in a position where he could fall and really do some damage to himself, like fall over and smack his head on the corner of a table. Bapaw will be right there to catch him and protect that head. He doesn’t even realize what I’m doing because he is so engrossed in whatever he is up to, but I am protecting him. And sometimes he dashes around the room or outside in the yard and he falls. It surprises him and hurts him a little. But I know there is no real danger to him. So I will say, “You’re all right, Wesley. You can get up. You’re fine.”

That’s what God is doing for us. He’s right there protecting us, even when we don’t know it because we are so engrossed in what we are doing. And sometimes we fall and it feels like we are hurt, but he says, “You’re all right, Child. Get up. You’re fine.” And to our surprise, we can get up and keep going.

Can I really believe that God is with us, protecting me? Is God really there? Yes, Jesus is alive and at work in our world. Years ago I served on an ordination council for a man named Steve Weik. He was a terrific man who at the time had a potentially fatal disease, yet he wanted to keep serving Christ. He was able to go about his life with remarkable peace, calmness, courage, enthusiasm and joy because he knew Jesus had defeated death. He also related an interesting story about the presence of God. He was teaching a student how to share the good news of Christ with others. The young man needed some practical experience. So Steve decided they should look for someone on the college campus where he was working to talk to about the gospel. He said to his friend, “Let’s pray that God will lead us to someone he wants us to talk to.” They did that. Then, they looked around and noticed a young man sitting nearby smoking a cigarette. Steve said, “I think we should go talk to that guy.” They approached the man and said to him, “Excuse me, but would you mind if we asked your opinion on a question?” The guy said, “Maybe, what’s the question?” They said, “Do you think there is a God?” The guy looked stunned. His eyes popped wide open, his jaw dropped, and it was obvious he was struggling to think of what to say. Finally, he said, “Are you angels?” Steve said no one had ever asked him that before. He said, “No, we’re not. Why would you even ask that?” It turned out that the man was seriously depressed, so depressed that he had been contemplating taking his own life. As he sat there, he said, out of desperation he prayed. It was the first time in his entire life that he had ever prayed anything. He said, “God if you are real, please show me.” Almost as soon as he finished that prayer Steve and his friend approached him. Wow, what a coincidence! I don’t think so. God was there.

There is hope. The resurrection says there is hope because he has the power to defeat any enemy. We don’t need to fear. Yes, at times it can be like the Friday Jesus was executed, but Sunday is coming. The late Ray Stedman wrote, “Easter also stands for the presence of Christ with us to meet the pressures of life…Jesus Christ is just as much able to meet our need for hope…in the pressures of life (now) as he was in the first century.”

The great news of the crucifixion and the resurrection is that God loves us more than we can ever imagine. It is a fact he has proven by those events. So when the enemy seeks to discourage us by telling us God could not possibly love us, the cross and the empty tomb remind us that’s a lie from Satan whose intent is to destroy us. We can live in the truth that God loves us infinitely and beyond doubt. When he tells us to forget this God business and get what we want in life no matter what it takes, or when he tells us we should be afraid and there is no hope, we should remember that is the enemy barking, but he can’t bite us, for Jesus has removed his teeth.

Laurie and I watched the movie *Risen* this past week. I know many of you have seen it. This was the first time we’d seen it. It is a fictional story that focuses on a first century Roman tribune named Clavius, who witnesses the final moments of Jesus death on the cross. Days later he is tasked by Pontius Pilate with tracking down the body of Jesus after rumors of his resurrection start spreading and it is discovered that his tomb is empty. Clavius regards the rumors as absurd superstition and ruthlessly tries to track down the followers of Jesus. He eventually finds a group of them in an upper room. He enters the room intent on arresting them. But in that room he sees a group of them sitting around talking with none other than the Jesus he had seen die days before. The story is fiction, but it depicts something that happened to many people. They saw the impossible. What a moment when he is stunned to see Jesus, alive, well, talking, joyful. In that instant everything changed. The entire world was different. So it is for us. Satan’s most powerful weapon, death, has been defeated. The power of Jesus has been revealed. He is with us, even this very moment. He is with us in the best and worst days of our lives, so that we are never alone, never without hope, never without help. No matter what our enemy tries to tell us, how he tries to intimidate, confuse, discourage and defeat us, he is toothless. He has lost. He knows it, and we know it, so we can live every moment of our lives with hope.