

Since the last week of February, our television screens and social media news feed have been flooded with images from Ukraine. The Ukrainian people have posted videos on Facebook and Twitter of Russian MiGs firing missiles into civilian populated areas while the screams of their frightened and confused children can be heard in the background running for cover. The horror of these real-time sights and sounds display the incredible and terrible lengths Vladimir Putin is willing to go in an attempt to slake his lust for power, dominance, and tyranny.

Of course, history will be quick to remind us that Putin is just the latest example in a long line of tyrants. Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot - men who were willing to do whatever it took to gain power and control, and yet were never satisfied when they did.

Then again, we don't have to look across an ocean to see such wickedness. Oppression and abuse of power can be seen in everything from domestic violence to human trafficking, abortion to sexual abuse. We don't have to look far to seeing people, all of whom are made in the image of God, being treated as if they were simply a means to an end, like a product to be used, taken advantage of, or discarded completely for one's own personal pleasure or convenience. In a phrase, it's a denial and defacing the image of God in another. In a word, it's evil.

The reality of evil is often one of the biggest hangups for people when it comes to faith in God. They openly wonder, "How could a good and loving God, who is all-powerful and all-knowing, allow such evil to exist - to seemingly, at times, run rampant - in the world?"

This morning, we find that our wrestling with evil in the world - and the evil in us - brings us back to the cross of Christ. As N.T. Wright says, "What the cross offers is not a philosophical explanation of evil, what it is or why it's there, nor a set of suggestions for how we might adjust our lifestyles so that evil will mysteriously disappear from the world. Rather, the cross is at the center of the story in which the living *God deals with it.*"

At the cross, Christ triumphs over evil. Read Colossians 2:13-15

In the second chapter of Paul's letter to the believers in Colossae, the apostle is writing about the unsearchable riches and glory of Christ and the Colossian's incredible union with Jesus as believers. Paul goes on to remind these early Christians of how that new reality came into existence in v13-14: "And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross."

This is the wonderful heart of the gospel that we've seen these last two weeks in Romans 5:8, Isaiah 53:6, and Romans 3:23-26 - that, at the cross, God proves his love in that, while we were dead in our trespasses, sinful in our nature, enemies in our hearts toward Him, God reconciled us to himself through the death of his Son. Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, lovingly taking upon himself to full weight of our wickedness as the atoning sacrifice for our sin, condemned in our place on the cross, so that God might be just (punishing sin) and the justifier, making sinners righteous who trust in Jesus.

And even though there's enough beauty and mystery in these words for us to spend a lifetime exploring, that's not where Paul stops in our passage. The apostle goes on in v15 to put before the

Colossians (and before us) yet another glorious truth of what God accomplished at the cross. Paul writes, "He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them at the cross." There's multiple layers and imagery in this short and wonderful verse, and we're going to spend the rest of our time taking it all in.

Rulers and authorities

We should begin by asking, "Who are the rulers and authorities that Paul mentions?" There are really two answers, and both are deeply connected to the other.

First, rulers and authorities is a reference to earthly powers, officials, and governments that conduct themselves under the principles and priorities of this fallen world: dominance and control, greed and oppression and corruption.

As we mentioned before, examples of such kingdoms and leaders can and have been seen throughout human history. Like the monstrous beasts that we saw rising up of darkened waters in Daniel 7, violent, power-hungry kingdoms have risen and fallen over the centuries, from the ancient empires like Babylon to the horrors of Nazi Germany. Really, no earthly power and government is free from this description - even our own. Nearly 250 years of legalized slavery and over 60 million government sanctioned abortions since 1973 should be enough for us to see that America is not exempt from the wickedness and evil of beastly kingdoms.

And yet over and underneath these earthly powers, the language of rulers and authorities also points to the spiritual powers of evil and darkness. Paul writes to the Ephesians, saying, "For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 6:12).

The chief manifestation of this spiritual evil is Satan himself, who Paul refers to in Ephesians 2:2 as "the prince of the power of the air" who is influencing the "course of this world." He goes by many names - the Evil One, the Accuser, the Father of Lies, the god of this age, who seeks to steal, kill, and destroy and who Peter describes as a roaring lion seeking someone to devour (1 Peter 5:8).

What we need to understand is that there's a deep connection between the ungodly rulers and authorities of this world and the spiritual rulers and authorities of evil in the heavenly places. When we go back to Daniel 7 or forward to Revelation 13, we see how often the earthly empires of men are influenced by spiritual forces of evil and the Evil One.

Make no mistake: when we see the rich and powerful oppressing the poor and vulnerable, the strong abusing the weak, all in the name of greed, pride, and control, we're seeing the fruit of evil and the influence of the demonic.

It's easier for us to fall into than we might think. Jesus told Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man" (Matthew 16:23). All we have to do to be unwittingly campaign for the Enemy and the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places is set our minds on the things of this world rather than the things of God. We often fail to realize how deeply affected we are by the reality of our sin. It was Martin Lloyd-Jones who once described our sinful condition as being filled with a disease, with one of the side-effects being that

we feel perfectly healthy! We don't understand how influence we are when our minds are set on the priorities of this age, easily swayed by "the prince of the power of the air."

And so the rulers and authorities in Scripture include both the earthly rulers of this age and the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places; and, throughout his public ministry, Jesus had frequent "run-ins" with both, from temptation in the wilderness from Satan to the corrupt opposition of the religious establishment. All this seemed to culminate in the rulers and authorities of this age sentencing Jesus to mockery, to suffering, and to death on a cross.

God triumphed over the rulers and authorities at the cross

For those who walked by Golgotha on Good Friday and saw Christ hanging condemned on the tree, flies buzzing over his bloodied and torn body, rebels at his side, as the crowds and religious leaders hurled insults and the Roman soldiers played dice for his clothes, it would have looked like the powers that be (and Satan himself) had won. The would-be Messiah was defeated, his disciples had scattered, and soon no one would even remember the name Jesus of Nazareth.

Yet what looked like the victory of rulers and authority of this age was part of the sovereign plan of God to turn evil on its head. Paul tells the Colossians that it was *at the cross* that God triumphed over the wicked rulers and authorities, both earthly and spiritual: "He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them at the cross."

In Acts 4, the church gathers in the midst of persecution and prays: "for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place" (Acts 4:24-28). If there's anything that we learned in our series in Daniel, it's this - that no matter how chaotic or catastrophic the world may seem around us, God is absolutely sovereign over all things.

As Todd Still writes so well, in crucifying the Lord of Glory, the rulers of this age thought they had done away with a Roman rebel. By stripping him naked and hanging him on the cross, political and religious powers thought they were subjecting to shame a peasant Jew with a handful of followers, and thus ending his influence.

Yet, all the while, a greater plan was unfolding. Those sinister forces that sought Jesus's death were, in his death, defeated and disgraced. The captors became the captive; the would-be-victors were vanquished. Christ triumphed through what looked like defeat. He conquered by being conquered. He disarmed by being disarmed. He put to open shame by being put to open shame.

The tragedy of the cross became the triumph of God, and ultimately it was evil itself that was conquered by the self-giving, beloved Son. Jesus dealt with evil by unleashing evil on Himself. At the cross, Christ suffer the consequences of the political, social, cultural, personal, and religious wickedness - and, in doing so, exhausts it for those who believe and follow Him.

Disarmed and put to open shame

What does that mean for us as believers? Paul writes that God triumphed at the cross, resulting in two things: the rulers and authorities being "disarmed" and "put to open shame" - like a Roman general, riding triumphantly through the streets, with his enemies in chains, conquered and humiliated, behind him.

Disarmed is a military term referring to someone being stripped of their weapons, neutralizing their threat in battle. How does that work? Because, if we look around our world, it seems like Satan is anything but neutralized! How have Satan and the spiritual forces of darkness disarmed at the cross?

The primary business of Satan is accusation - that's what Satan actually means. The Enemy loves to bring accusation and legal charges against God's people (see Revelation 12:10) - and, before Christ, each and everyone of us stood condemned.

However, as we saw last week, at the cross the full weight of our sin and rebellion was placed upon Jesus, who absorbed the just wrath of God in our place. This is why Paul writes in Romans 8:1, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." We're declared righteous before God, legally justified, and sent out of the courtroom of condemnation forever - and Satan can't do a thing about it! As the apostle writes later in Romans 8:33-34, "Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died - more than that, who was raised - who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us." The threat of Satan's accusations have been disarmed at the cross and the empty tomb.

What's more, as Paul writes, Christ was raised from the grave, liberating from death those who believe and follow him. Jesus is the first fruits of the resurrection, so that what happened to Jesus on Easter morning will happen to all of those who belong to Christ. Hebrews 2:14-15 says that Christ, the Son of God, took on our mortality and died on the cross so "that through death, he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery." The threat of eternal death that the Enemy used to strike fear in the heart of men, has been disarmed at the cross and the resurrection.

As Martin Luther wrote, Christ's victory at the cross means that Jesus has "taken away the law, killed my sin, destroyed my death in his body, and in this way empties hell, judges the devil, crucifies him, and throws him down into the hell. In other words, everything that once used to torment and oppress me, Christ has set aside; he has disarmed it and made a public example of it triumphing over it at the cross."

This reality not only disarmed Satan, but also the rulers and authorities of this age. Going back to Romans 8:35-39, Paul writes, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, 'For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.' No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Notice that Paul rattles off all kinds of suffering and hardship that the rulers and authorities of the world could use to afflict believers - and the Roman government eventually did. Yet nothing could ultimately conquer or defeat them! The worst they could do was kill you, ushering you in eternal glory and resurrected life in the age to come. As Soren Kierkegaard famously said, "The tyrant dies and his reign ends; the martyr dies and his reign begins."

Withstand in the evil day

We don't have to look very far, especially today, to see the reality of evil around us. Sometimes it can seem overwhelming. Yet we can know that, at the cross, Christ conquered evil - and, if we're in Christ, His victory is our victory! Satan is an enemy, but he is a conquered enemy. The tyrants of this world may wage war, but their days are numbered.

How do we live? "Stand strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might" (Ephesians 6:10)

When the Russian invasion began a few weeks ago, many people justifiably fled the capital city. Others stayed - like this group of believers in Kyiv, gathered around their kitchen table, sing the words of this old hymn: (Video of Ukrainian family singing)

*When I fear my faith will fail,
Christ will hold me fast;
When the tempter would prevail,
He can hold me fast!*

*He will hold me fast,
He will hold me fast;
For my Savior loves me so,
He will hold me fast.*