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COACH GOD

Before practically every major league ball game, be it baseball or one of the lesser sports, the team meets to be briefed on the day's game plan. Somebody, called manager, coach, trainer, or some other title, lays out the method to be used to win that day's game. In football they may dictate the first ten or fifteen plays. In baseball, they may analyze the pitcher's "stuff" to determine how aggressive the hitters should be. In tennis or boxing, they may analyze weak sides or strong sides. Whatever the sport or game, the players are expected to follow the game plan. A quarterback who goes against the plan from the beginning won't last long in that game, or the game in general. A pitcher who knows that a particular batter loves to hit low, outside curve balls over the fence had best stick with fastballs and sliders or he won't finish the inning.

The nation of Israel had God as their manager. Sometimes they followed the game plan; sometimes they didn't. Sometimes they understood the game plan; sometimes they didn't.

Israel had crossed over the Jordan river on dry ground. They were facing the next game, against Jericho. Coach God called them together and laid out the game plan. Six days march around the city in silence except for the sound of *shofars*. On the seventh day march around seven times and then shout at the long blast on the *shofar*. Surely as a quarterback, Joshua questioned this strategy. How are you going to get a first down, much less a touchdown, with this game plan? Fortunately, Joshua was a good quarterback, and the plan worked. Jericho fell. (Josh 6) Unfortunately, Achan violated the game plan by taking spoils. As a result, Israel lost the next game, against Ai. (Josh 7) Achan was forcibly ejected from the game.

Gideon was selected to manage the Israelite team. He may have had specific goals in mind, but his General Manager, God, decided in a different plan for the draft. He didn't want hitters, he wanted pitchers. Clay pitchers to be specific. He told Gideon how to draft his team in such a way that they would meet the minimum roster size. Then he used his pitchers to their best advantage. That is, Gideon surrounded the enemy army at night, then blew *shofars* and broke pitchers with torches in them to confuse the Midianites. Of course, the game plan worked. (Jdg 7)

Jesus met with the apostles and laid out the game plan that Coach God wanted. He said, "ye shall be

witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth." (Acts 1:8) Elsewhere he told them to "tarry ye in the city of Jerusalem, until ye be endued with power from on high." (Lk 24:49) Following the coach's game plan, the church began on the following Pentecost in Jerusalem. After the death of Stephen, "they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria, except the apostles." (Acts 8:1) The remainder of the book of Acts is devoted to showing how the rest of the game plan, "unto the uttermost part of the earth," was carried out.

Churches have pregame meetings as well. The assembly of the church is not the game; it is preparation. God is the owner and general manager. Jesus is the coach or manager. The preacher may be the bench coach or line coach. The management and the players (us) must be on the same page of the playbook for victory. We are all in the game together. That has a couple of implications.

The team does not sit in the locker room after the game plan is explained. They go out to play the game. Our coach does not expect us to just sit in the assembly and that is where our participation ends. After the assembly we are expected to fulfil the Great Commission in our own way out in the stadium of the world. We are the players. We are not "CEO Christians" (Christmas/Easter Only).

We have to know the playbook. A catcher doesn't just go out and sit behind home plate. He spends hours studying his own pitchers and the opponent's hitters. A tight end needs to know where he is supposed to go on every play called. Professionals don't just study the playbook in the locker room. They spend hours every week going over the playbook and video. Likewise, we need to be studying our playbook, the Bible. We don't want to disappoint our coach.

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BRUXISM

Do you suffer from bruxism? The symptoms include waking up with a headache or jaw pain. In extreme cases they may include broken teeth. It results from clenching or grinding your teeth, usually (but not necessarily) at night. The name of the condition comes from a word sometimes translated gnashing. Jesus used bruxism, gnashing of teeth, to describe a punishment. At other times it describes a health condition or a result of stress.

It describes a health condition, if you can call demon possession that. After the Transfiguration, Jesus was faced with a dispute. A man had brought his son to the disciples for healing. That was not unexpected since they had recently been given the power to cast out evil spirits. The symptoms for this young man were: “he teareth him: and he foameth, and gnasheth with his teeth, and pineth away.” (Mk 9:18) This particular evil spirit was characterized, among other things, by bruxism. Jesus cast the spirit out of him and explained that this kind of spirit

The stress of Stephen’s accusation brought on gnashing.

only came out with “prayer and fasting.” In essence he was chiding the disciples for not praying and fasting enough before needing to use the power he had given them.

While most people today do not have the power to heal without the ability to prescribe herbal or chemical remedies, we can learn from this young man who gnashed his teeth, or at least from the healer. We are going to face problems in life that seem insurmountable. We or others may be figuratively gnashing teeth, looking for spiritual healing. Jesus is the ultimate healer, but if we are going to play our part we must prepare ourselves. We must devote time to study of the Bible, and prayer, and maybe even fasting. Only then can you “be ready to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you.” (1 Pet 3:15)

Gnashing under stress

The most common cause of bruxism is stress. A mouth guard might alleviate the symptom, but the condition will persist until the stressor is removed. What greater stressor is there than being confronted with your sin?

When John the Baptist confronted Herod with his sin of marrying his brother’s wife, Herod threw him in

prison. This gave that wife the opportunity to ask for John’s head on a silver platter. (Matt 14; Mk 6) Herod was stressed by facing his sin.

Paul was in chains before the Roman territorial governor. One would think that Felix would have no reason to fear Paul. He had the upper hand. He was the stressor, not the stressed. Or so he believed until Paul spoke.

And as he reasoned of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come, Felix trembled, and answered, Go thy way for this time; when I have a convenient season, I will call for thee. (Acts 24:25)

Felix was faced with his sins and the judgement to come. He trembled. He was stressed.

Stephen was called before the council for preaching about Jesus. The charge was saying that Jesus would destroy Jerusalem and change the customs passed down from Moses. The High Priest asked him if the charges were true. Stephen took that opportunity to present a masterful recounting of Jewish history. (Acts 7) He concluded by saying that just as their ancestors killed the prophets, so they had murdered the one of whom the prophets wrote. “When they heard these things, they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed on him with their teeth.” (Acts 7:54) The stress of his accusation brought on the gnashing. It also brought on the murder of Stephen.

Weeping and gnashing

Matthew was diligent about recording the times that Jesus spoke about “weeping [or wailing] and gnashing of teeth.” In fact, the only time that phrase is used outside of Matthew is one time when Luke mentions it. In Luke’s account (Lk 13:23-30) one person asks Jesus if only a few will be saved. He replies that many will call him Lord that did not really follow him.

There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when ye shall see Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, and all the prophets, in the kingdom of God, and you yourselves thrust out. (Lk 13:28)

The idea in Luke is similar to the six times that Matthew records Jesus using the phrase. In Matthew 8:12 the circumstances are almost identical. In Matthew 24:51, a discussion of the destruction of Jerusalem, Jesus says to be watchful. He likens it to a householder who left his servants to watch the house. If a servant was asleep when the master came home, that is when the Romans come to destroy Jerusalem, the master “shall cut him asunder, and appoint him his portion with the hypocrites: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” The one who does not watch will fall with Jerusalem.

The other four times come at the end of parables about the kingdom of heaven. Two are about the end of the world. The others are about the kingdom in the world.

“The kingdom of heaven is likened unto a man which sowed good seed in his field: But while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat, and went his way.” (Matt 13:24-43) When the weeds grew up with the wheat, the workers asked if they should pull them. The master said to wait until harvest. Then the weeds were separated from the wheat. Jesus explained to the apostles that the good seed were “the children of the kingdom,” while the bad seed were the children of the wicked one. They grow up together in this world, but at the end of the world angels will gather the wicked and “shall cast them into a furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth.” (Matt 13:43)

In a similar parable (Matt 13:47-50), a net is cast into the sea and gathers all kinds of fish (people). At the end of the world “the angels shall come forth, and sever the wicked from among the just, And shall cast them into the furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth.” (Matt 13:49-50)

In these two parables, a division is made at the end of the world. The sons of the kingdom are separated from the sons of the world. The latter are sentence to fire, where they will weep and grind their teeth. Apparently, separation from God results in bruxism.

“The kingdom of heaven is like unto a certain king, which made a marriage for his son, And sent forth his servants to call them that were bidden to the wedding: and they would not come. (Matt 22:1-14) So the king sent his servants to bring in anyone they could find to the wedding feast. When the master came in he saw a man who had not been given a wedding garment, and therefore had probably tried to sneak in unbidden. The master told his servants to bind him and cast him “into outer darkness; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

There are three classes of people in this parable: those who reject the kingdom outright, those who accept the kingdom, and those who attempt to enter the kingdom but not on the master’s terms. There are many who want nothing to do with the church. But there are also those who want church on their own terms. They don’t want to follow the biblical pattern for the church. They want to be part of the body, but they want to come in the way they choose, and do things the way they think best. These will think they are in the light, but they are really in outer darkness, and their fight against the truth will result in weeping and grinding of their teeth. Once one has experienced the light, the darkness seems even darker and the stress becomes so great that one grinds the teeth.

“Therefore be ye also ready: for in such an hour as ye think not the Son of man cometh.” (Matt 24:42-51) The wise servant will be watchful, and be rewarded when the master comes home unexpectedly. But the wicked servant says that the master is delayed, and so beats the

other servants and gets drunk. His master will come home unexpectedly and “shall cut him asunder, and appoint him his portion with the hypocrites: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

“The kingdom of heaven is as a man travelling into a far country, who called his own servants, and delivered unto them his goods. And unto one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one.” (Matt 25:14-30) Two of the servants invested what they had and doubled their money. The third hid the money, intending to return it to the master when he got home. When the master came home, he praised the ones who had invested their money, but he condemned the one who hid his coin. He ordered that the coin be given to the one who had made the most money. The he commanded, “cast ye the unprofitable servant into outer darkness: there shall be

Apparently, separation from God results in bruxism.

weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

These last two parables come at the end of a discussion about the destruction of the Temple, which would come about forty years later. The message in both is to be watchful. Nobody would know when the Romans would come to destroy Jerusalem. Earlier Jesus said there would be no signs of his coming, which would result in the Roman destruction of the city. Therefore, Christians were to be watchful, so that they could flee the city and avoid the destruction. Those that were not watchful would end up weeping and grinding their teeth.

Although Jesus was talking in these last two about the destruction of Jerusalem, the use of the phrase “weeping and gnashing of teeth” can tie them to the first two parables. We are no longer anticipating the destruction of the Temple, but we are anticipating the destruction of the end of the world. We must watch, lest we also be consigned to a place of weeping and bruxism.

In the case of physical bruxism, the symptoms may be alleviated by the use of a mouth guard. The condition, though, will probably not be relieved except by eliminating the stress that causes it. So it is with spiritual bruxism. Some of the symptoms may be alleviated by a mouth guard.

If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man's religion is vain. (Jas 1:26)

Jesus also had a prescription for the root cause. “Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself.” (Matt 6:34) Don’t worry. You will save your teeth that way.

PRINCE OF THIS WORLD

“In Latin America, more elections are decided by bullets than ballots.” This statement was made by the professor early in my Latin American History class, and seemed to be justified. Shortly before I took the class, Salvador Allende of Chile became the first Marxist elected in a free election in a liberal democracy. After three years in office he was ousted by a military coup under Augusto Pinochet and backed by the American CIA. Juan Peron was ousted from the presidency of Argentina by a military coup in 1945. In 1979, Nicaraguan Anastasio Somoza was ousted by the Sandinistas. These are but a few examples in Latin America. Many more such examples could be found in English history (Wars of the Roses) and elsewhere. Shakespeare wrote, “uneasy is the head that wears a crown.”

Scripture is also full of forcible changes in government. The history of the northern tribes of Israel, as documented in 1 and 2 Kings, is full of changes in dynasty. One king would do something so bad that God would promise that his line would not last, and sure enough, shortly one of his descendants was killed by a servant or a soldier.

There is, however, a more important case of someone being deposed. Some people call the devil the king or prince of this world. Every time somebody says that, it seems that they are bowing down to the devil’s power, whether they agree or not. John the apostle would disagree with anyone who used that title today, because he says the prince has been deposed. The only question is when it happened.

One cannot argue that the devil no longer has power on earth. “Your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour.” (1 Pet 5:8) Much of the sin that happens is a result of “the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life.” (1

Jn 2:16) It is an indirect result of the operation of the devil, who tempted Eve and Adam in the beginning. We make choices, sometimes bad ones, without direct influence of the devil. Just because the devil still operates in this world, though, does not mean that he still holds authority. After the English Civil War, Oliver Cromwell ruled England. Nevertheless, Charles II continued to have supporters and take action against the Protectorate of Cromwell. In the same way, the devil may have been deposed, but still maintains a certain amount of power.

But has he been deposed? By whom has he been deposed? By none other than the King of Kings. Even before his death, Jesus proclaimed the end of the reign of the “prince of this world.” John records three instances where Jesus predicted the eminent end of the devil’s reign.

In John 12, Jesus admits that his soul is troubled by what was soon to happen to him. He asks God to glorify his name, and God replies in a voice from heaven. Jesus tells those who heard it, “Now is the judgment of this world: now shall the prince of this world be cast out. And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all *men* unto me.” (Jn 12:31-32) He makes it clear that the crucifixion will be the point at which the devil will be deposed from being the prince of this world.

On the night he was betrayed, Jesus said, “Hereafter I will not talk much with you: for the prince of this world cometh, and hath nothing in me.” (Jn 14:30) Later in the evening he says that he must go that the Comforter will come who will “reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment...Of judgment, because the prince of this world is judged.” (Jn 16:8, 11)

The prince of this world has been deposed. Let us not give him a title and authority to which he is no longer entitled.

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