

The chess pieces themselves represent the struggle. The black king, with his mantle and feathered cap, mirrors that of his master, Satan, as he urges his soldiers onwards. The satyr (half-man, half-fawn) in front of the king tramples on a cross, alluding to Satan's avowed aim of destroying Christ's church. The griffin to his left raises his left arm as though in peace all-the-while hiding a vicious stiletto behind his back. Such terrible intent is repeated throughout the black pieces, who march relentlessly on the virtuous and unarmed white pieces. Their advance is echoed by the approach of a spider towards Man which, with its power to spin a fatal web, symbolizes Satan's goal to ensnare the believer.

Now, I am not a good chess player. The game takes too long, has too many rules, and frankly makes my head hurt. What I do know is this: a chess game ends when one of the Kings can move no more. Once the king is trapped, the winning side declares "checkmate" and the game is over. For years, admirers of Retzsch's painting believed that man would lose the game and forfeit his soul to Satan; but one man's encounter with the painting altered that narrative.

According to an article entitled "Anecdote of Morphy" printed in the *Columbia Chess Chronicle* (August 18, 1888), the American chess champion Paul Morphy (1837-1884) once visited Richmond, Virginia, and at dinner, had his attention drawn to a copy of the *Checkmate* painting hanging prominently on his host's wall. Morphy approached the painting, examined it intently for some time, then turned to his host and said, modestly: "I think that I can take the young man's game and win." His astonished host replied, "Why, that's impossible! Not even you, Mr. Morphy can retrieve that game." "Yet, I think I can," said Morphy. So, a chess board was arranged exactly as it appeared in the painting, and to everyone's surprise, Morphy snatched victory from Satan, proving that the soul of the young man in the painting could be saved. It was not checkmate after all.

A checkmate is more than just a dreaded position on a chessboard. Checkmate is a place in life you never want to find yourself. When the cancer spreads, it can feel like checkmate. When the marriage ends, it can feel like checkmate. When the job is terminated, it can feel like checkmate. Checkmate is a situation where we are out of options. The king is cornered. The king is out of moves. Game over. But Paul Morphy looked at the devil laughing, and he looked at the man in the throes of despair, and he realized that the king still had one more move. When we believe we are cornered, when we believe everything is lost, when we believe that there is no more hope, Morphy reminds us that the king still has one more move.

If truth be told, this is the message of Easter: The King still has one more move. Just three days ago, we conceded the death of Jesus at the cross. On Good Friday, say the Scriptures, Jesus died alone, hanging on a tree between common criminals, betrayed and abandoned by his friends, condemned by his own people, and executed by the political forces of the world. Jesus, the Son of God, who healed diseases and pardoned sins, who fulfilled the prophecies of the long-promised Messiah, who saved His people from their sins, died. Just imagine what that felt like for the disciples who followed Jesus and for those who believed in him. Their teacher was dead. Their messiah was crucified. Their hope was gone. Checkmate. No more moves. Game over.

When Jesus asked, "My God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34), Satan smiled. When Jesus exclaimed, "It is finished" (John 19:30), and he gave up his spirit and died, Satan laughed because Satan knew the prophecy that "The Son of Man must be delivered over to the hands of sinners, be crucified" (Luke 24:7). Satan seemingly checkmated God, putting our souls at risk. But Satan did not know or he neglected to read the rest of the verse: "The Son of Man must be delivered over to the hands of sinners, be crucified *and on the third day be raised again.*" God still had one more move!

God always has one more move! Throughout Scripture, God assures God's people that God can make a way where there seems to be no way. When the Hebrew people suffered slavery in Egypt, it was not checkmate: God had another move, freeing them and parting the Red Sea to accomplish their escape. When the Hebrews wandered in the desert for forty years, it was not checkmate: God had another move, leading them and providing food and water for them daily. When the nation of Israel faced pressure from the surrounding nations, it was not checkmate: God had another move, raising up judges and prophets and kings to guide and protect the people.

When the people of Judah faced exile because of their sinfulness, it was not checkmate: God revealed that a future day of salvation would come, and it did. When Daniel was thrown into a den of hungry lions, it was not checkmate: God had another move and Daniel remained safe. When a little boy only had two fish and a few loaves of bread to feed thousands of people, it was not checkmate: God had another move and they collected 12 baskets of leftover food after the meal was served. When the criminal on the cross next to Jesus thought it was the end for him, it was not checkmate: God had another move and promised the man he would be with Jesus in paradise.

When Mary Magdalene and Mary, the mother of James and Joseph, went to the tomb on Easter morning, it probably seemed like a checkmate situation. Jesus was dead. He was

buried three days. They went bearing spices to anoint his body, part of the burial ritual (Mark 16: Luke 23). They expected to find a corpse. Instead, they found an angel who said to them: "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay" (Matthew 28:5-6). Just when the women thought all was lost and the game was over, the angel revealed God's greatest move: Jesus is alive! Death has lost its sting! There is no more victory for the grave! (1 Corinthians 15:55)

What's more, the angel tells the women to go and tell the disciples that Jesus is risen. As they hurry along the road, they meet Jesus face-to-face. "Greetings," he says to them, and they clasp his feet and worship him (Matthew 28:9). Then Jesus also tells the women: "Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me" (Matthew 28:10). Jesus turns a checkmate scenario into a plan of action. Jesus tells us not to fear when we face checkmate situations; instead, we are to go and tell the world what our God can do!

When we look at our world, it is easy to despair. With war, violence, pandemics, depression, isolation, unemployment, struggling marriages, soaring prices, and political division, we can easily become disillusioned. When can we feel lost. We can lose hope. But when it seems like our opponent has way more pieces in play, when our position is weak and we seem to be losing the struggle, we need only look to God who still has one move left. When it looks like checkmate, the game is not over. Our lives and our future are in God's hands, safe and secure because of Jesus Christ. God is the only King who can never be defeated, because our God always has one move left! Christ is Risen! He is risen indeed! Hallelujah! Amen.

Prayer: Lord of Life, we thank you that nothing surprises you. We recognize that nothing is too hard for you and that your plans and purposes are for our good. Help us to remember all the times in the Bible, and in our own lives, where we have felt like we were at an impasse, where the enemy was telling us that we were in check, but you had a new direction and new plan to rescue us. When there are times you do things we cannot believe, help us to remember that they are ultimately a part of your carefully woven plan. So, to you who can do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, we give all praise, honor, and glory. In the power of our Risen Lord, Jesus Christ we pray, Amen.

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## Checkmate?

Easter Sunday, April 5, 2026

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Matthew 28:1-10

Artist Pablo Picasso famously said: "the purpose of art is washing the dust of daily life off our souls." Picasso also said: "Every now and then one paints a picture that seems to have opened a door and serves as a stepping-stone to other things." Maybe it's dreamy like Van Gogh's *Starry Night* or Claude Monet's *Water Lilies*. Or surreal like Salvador Dali's *The Persistence of Memory* (you know, the painting with all the melting clocks!) or impressionist like Georges Seurat's *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*.

Maybe it's a landscape like El Greco's *View of Toledo* or Canaletto's *The Grand Canal and the Church of the Salute* in Venice. Maybe it's a slice of Americana like Norman Rockwell's *Freedom From Want* or or Grant Wood's *American Gothic*. Maybe it's romantic like Gustav Klimt's *The Kiss* or Renoir's *Lovers*. Maybe it's historical like Picasso's *Guernica* or Eugene Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People*. Maybe it's Bob Ross and his "happy little clouds." Whatever painting captures your imagination is a stepping-stone to other things.

One of those stepping-stone paintings, for me, is *Die Schachspieler* ("The Chess Players") painted in 1799 by 19<sup>th</sup> Century German artist Friedrich Moritz August Retzsch (1779–1857). More commonly known as *Checkmate*, the subject of Retzsch's painting is the classic German legend of Faust, a dissatisfied scholar who makes a deal with the Devil, exchanging his soul for unlimited knowledge, magic, and worldly pleasure. In this "Faustian Bargain," he sacrifices spiritual values for knowledge and power.

The painting depicts two chess players: Satan and Man in a high stakes game of life and death. Satan is seated on the left, arrogant, confident, and not even looking at the chessboard. Satan looks contemptuously at his opponent, even a little bored as he awaits man's next move. Satan is certain he will triumph over man, and when he wins, he will seize man's soul. Man is seated on the right, playing for his life, but he appears to be losing. Man seems dejected as he contemplates his next move, holding his head in his hand as he stares at the chessboard. Man appears stymied, the game in check. Satan is just one move away from winning and he knows it. So does the man, and so does the angel who is standing between the two competitors. Her dismal gaze conveys to us that she, too, is distressed by man's impending defeat.