

The prince of this world

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The phrase “the prince of this world” is exclusive to the Gospel of John (12:31; 14:30; 16:11). In this article we aim to explore what the Spirit through John was teaching the disciples and people of Christ’s day, and what it is teaching us also.

WHO OR WHAT is “the prince of this world”? Is it a mysterious code word for something, or is it a reference to a certain group of people? Why is this particular phrase used? The subject will be tackled using the following approach:

- 1 Set the phrase in context by looking at where it appears in the narrative of John’s Gospel.
- 2 Undertake a detailed analysis of the phrase “the prince of this world”.
- 3 Examine the three passages in John where this phrase is found.
- 4 Draw together some conclusions and lessons for ourselves.

Context

The [table below](#) sets the three passages in context within the rest of John’s Gospel. The pattern that emerges appears to shed light on what we are to understand by “the prince of this world”.

There is a close association between the sufferings and death of Christ (his hour) and “the prince of this world” being judged and cast out. The phrase is not used before Christ’s hour was come, nor after, and so “the prince of this world” was to be cast out at the death of Christ, or a short period after. The context surrounding the use of this phrase is that the Lord Jesus

Christ is preparing his disciples for his death and their ministries without him.

Interpretations

One common view is that “the prince of this world” is sin. This view holds credibility in that Christ was destroying the power of sin by dealing it a fatal blow at his death. However, I do not think that this is what John is referring to. I think that he had something else in mind, something that would mean a lot to the disciples and the people. I believe it is a reference to a group of people: the political and religious leaders of Israel. It would hit the disciples hard as they realised that the Jewish rulers were to be cast out and the Jewish age was to come to a partial end. This realisation would no doubt make them consider their own personal positions, as it should us also.

The phrase analysed

Having considered the context, we proceed to undertake an examination of the phrase itself. On first reading the phrase sounds like a title or a mysterious code name given to someone or something, but a little analysis will shed light upon what the text is really saying.

The word for “prince” here simply means ‘ruler’. It denotes the idea of rulership and power; for example:

“And, behold, there came a man named Jairus, and he was a *ruler* of the synagogue: and he fell down at Jesus’ feet, and besought him that he would come into his house” (Lk. 8:41);

Phrases used	Passage(s) in John
Christ’s “hour” not yet arrived	2:4; 4:21,23; 5:25,28; 7:30; 8:20
hour is come	12:23,27(×2)
prince of this world	12:31
hour is come	13:1
prince of this world	14:30
“I go my way”, that is, hour was come	16:5
prince of this world	16:11
hour is come	16:32; 17:1
betrayed	18
death	19

“There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews” (Jno. 3:1).

Nicodemus was a “prince of this world” in the sense that he was a Jewish ruler. He is an example of a “prince of this world” who was faithful and did turn to Christ, and so is not included within those who were to be condemned and cast out.

There are three words used in the New Testament translated as ‘world’. A look at the Olivet Prophecy in Matthew 24 determines the different usages, summarised below:

Matthew 24	Meaning
<i>Aiōn</i> (v. 3)	An age—speaking of a period or span of time
<i>Oikoumenē</i> (v. 14)	The inhabited world—piece of land
<i>Kosmos</i> (v. 21)	An order or arrangement (1 Pet. 3:3, ‘adorning’)

Our word is *kosmos*—an order or arrangement of things. The difference between the Greek words is illuminating and instructive in our particular context. *Aiōn* is measured in time, *oikoumenē* in area, *kosmos* in power and influence; it is the order of things, the governments in control, etc.

The choice of *kosmos* in our phrase implies that “the prince of this world” is referring to the structure and order of the Jewish system. It appears to be a reference to the religious and political leaders of Israel who crucified Christ. The use of *kosmos* in 1 Peter 3:3 is interesting and sheds light on the usage of the word. It exhorts a woman not to worry about her outward appearance (plaiting of hair) because God is concerned with the heart of mankind. She is not to concern herself with the adorning (*kosmos*, arrangement) of her hair by plaiting it, but rather with developing a meek and quiet spirit. This is a helpful use of *kosmos*.

The casting out or judging of the ‘rulers of this arrangement’ was to begin at the death of Christ, for in Christ a new order, a new arrangement, was to be established that would be better than the old order. This is what the book of Hebrews concerns itself with.

The judgement of the prince

When and why was the prince of this world judged? Ultimately their order or arrangement was overthrown by the Romans in A.D. 70. Consider Daniel 8:11,12: “Yea, he magnified himself even to the prince of the host, and by him the daily sacrifice was taken away, and the place of his sanctuary was cast down. And an host was given him against the daily sacrifice by reason of

transgression, and it cast down the truth to the ground; and it practised, and prospered”.

In A.D. 70 the prince of this world was judged by God, through the power of the Roman army. Why? Because they had killed the “prince of the host”. They had crucified the Lord, they had cast him out of the world (Jno. 13:1). They were to receive exactly the same treatment as they gave to Christ, except that Christ’s casting out was unmerited. The connection between Christ’s death and the casting out of that Jewish order can

now be better understood. At the death of Christ, the religious leaders basically lost most of their power because of the Spirit-guided preaching of the apostles. Passages such as Acts 2:41-47; 10:45-48 and 11:18 show

that the rulers were gradually losing power, until in A.D. 70 they were cast out and their power was lost. “They of the circumcision” (10:45), and even some of the priests (6:7), believed the apostles doctrine, and so the power of the prince of this world was slowly decaying, and the ‘new order/ arrangement’ in Christ was being established as the gospel went forth.

With this in mind, a careful examination and closer analysis of the three passages where the phrase “the prince of this world” is used will be useful.

John 12:23-31

“And Jesus answered them, saying, The hour is come, that the Son of man should be glorified. Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit. He that loveth his life shall lose it; and he that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal. If any man serve me, let him follow me; and where I am, there shall also my servant be: if any man serve me, him will my Father honour. Now is my soul troubled; and what shall I say? Father, save me from this hour: but for this cause came I unto this hour. Father, glorify Thy name” (vv. 23-28). The time had come that both the Son of man and God’s Name should be glorified. In Christ’s death the Father would be glorified. Jesus wants to be saved from the hour if it be the Father’s will, but recognises that “for this cause came I unto this hour”. He came to die.

As soon as Jesus had uttered the words “Father, glorify Thy name”, there “came . . . a voice from

heaven, saying, I have both glorified it, and will glorify it again. The people therefore, that stood by, and heard it, said that it thundered: others said, An angel spake to him. Jesus answered and said, This voice came not because of me, but for your sakes. Now is the judgment of this world: now shall the prince of this world be cast out" (vv. 28-31).

How and why was this for their sakes? What benefit could they gain from this voice saying that God's Name would be glorified in Christ's death? I think the answer lies in the idea of "the prince of this world". All through the ministry of Christ there was a constant battle between Christ and the elders. They were constantly in confrontation. I suggest that the voice to the disciples and the people that believed was to say to them, 'You have followed the right way. You have chosen the Christ, and I will glorify My Name in his death'. Jesus explains that the prince of this world was now to be cast out.

This voice was for their sakes, for it told them that the elders who opposed the Son of God were to be cast out and their political and religious system with them. In other words, 'You have made the right choice, you are the Israel of God, you have followed the right master', which is why verses 25 and 26 say, "He that loveth his life shall lose it; and he that hateth his life in this world (*kosmos*) shall keep it unto life eternal. If any man serve me, let him follow me; and where I am, there shall also my servant be: if any man serve me, him will my Father honour".

The exhortation was to stay in the right way, for the elders and their power and government were to be cast out. This perhaps is how the voice was for their sakes. It would give them strength to endure the terrible crisis that was shortly to come.

John 14:28-30

"Ye have heard how I said unto you, I go away, and come again unto you. If ye loved me, ye would rejoice, because I said, I go unto the Father: for my Father is greater than I. And now I have told you before it come to pass, that, when it is come to pass, ye might believe. Hereafter I will not talk much with you: for the prince of this world cometh, and hath nothing in me".

The rulers of the present Jewish order "cometh". The Greek for "cometh" here is *erchetai*, which is a present third person singular form of the verb *erchomai*. It means he/she/it comes or is coming; it is a present tense, so the action is happening at that time. These words have a

remarkable fulfilment on the Mount of Olives shortly before Jesus was led away: "Then Jesus said unto the chief priests, and captains of the temple, and the elders, *which were come* to him, Be ye come out, as against a thief, with swords and staves?" (Lk. 22:52).

The prince of this world had come! And the judgement spoken of was shortly to take place. This was their hour (v. 53). In the following chapter Jesus speaks about the actions of the prince of this world, the Jewish leaders who were to put him to death. When Jesus was led away to be crucified he said to the women who followed, "Daughters of Jerusalem, weep not for me, but weep for yourselves, and for your children. For, behold, *the days are coming*, in the which they shall say, Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bare, and the paps which never gave suck" (23:28,29).

At Christ's death the people had said, "His blood be on us, and on our children" (Mt. 27:25). Jesus' message is that the prince of this world had come and that "the days [were] coming" when the Jewish system would be cast out, and the generation to come would suffer. A.D. 70 was a generation later, and so the children did suffer along with the remainder of the present generation.

It is perhaps of interest that at the end of this passage speaking of the prince of this world Jesus says, "Arise, let us go hence" (Jno. 14:31). Jesus was journeying to Calvary, and the next mention of his movements on this journey is found in 18:1, where he crosses the Cedron and meets the very people that we are suggesting are the prince of this world: "Judas then, having received a band of men and officers from the chief priests and Pharisees, cometh thither with lanterns and torches and weapons" (v. 3).

It is here that Jesus was betrayed, and delivered to the Jewish rulers. It appears that the Word is drawing our attention to the connection between the elders of Israel and Jesus' teaching concerning the casting out of the prince of this world. Jesus says to his disciples that "the prince of this world cometh" (14:30,31); he then arises and proceeds on his journey to take them to the place where he would meet the very people that he was speaking to them of!

John 16:8-12

"And when he [the Comforter] is come, he will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment: of sin, because they believe

not on me; of righteousness, because I go to my Father, and ye see me no more; of judgment, because the prince of this world is judged. I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now”.

The coming of the Comforter is associated with the prince of this world being judged. The word translated “reprove” is the word often translated ‘convince’;¹ the Holy Spirit would convince people of sin, righteousness and judgement. The proof of judgement would be that the political and religious system would be judged and cast out. These words in John 16 were fulfilled; many saw the decline of the Jewish state and saw the power of the Comforter.

It is worthy of note that all the people mentioned in these verses are literal: “they believe not”, “I go to my Father”, “see me no more”. This leads to the view that “the prince of this world” is a literal group of people also.

Conclusion

John 16:9 reads, “of sin, because they believe not on me”. The Holy Spirit would convince them of sin because they did not believe. These very words have already been used by Christ of himself:

“And because I tell you the truth, ye *believe not*. Which of you *convinceth* me of *sin*? And if I say the truth, why do ye not believe me? He that is of God heareth God’s words: ye therefore hear them not, because ye are not of God” (8:45-47).

Here we find the real problem that the Jewish leaders with their system of worship had: they heard not God’s words because they were not of God; this is why they were to be judged. They rejected God’s Word and rejected His Son.

This subject is beautifully and succinctly summed up by the Spirit through Paul in 1 Corinthians 2:6-8:

“Howbeit we speak wisdom among them that are perfect: yet not the wisdom of this world, nor of the *princes of this world, that come to nought*: but we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, even the hidden wisdom, which God ordained before the world unto our glory: which none of the *princes of this world* knew: for had they known it, they would not have *crucified the Lord of glory*”.

Where do we stand? Do we speak the wisdom of this world or godly wisdom? The princes of this world crucified the Lord, and as a result they come to nought, they were cast out. We too can do the same; it is sobering when we read that

we can “crucify . . . the Son of God afresh” (Heb. 6:6). This subject, then, is relevant for all ages, not just the world that ended in A.D. 70, and we do well to heed its stark warnings. Let us glean the lessons that Christ taught his disciples. We must each ask ourselves, *Where do I stand?*

A final thought

Why did God say “the prince of this world” and not something simpler, such as ‘the Jewish rulers’ or ‘the rulers of Israel’? The use of the phrase “the prince of this world” brings to light a remarkable contrast. They were being taught that “they are not all Israel, which are of Israel” (Rom. 9:6). This is a lesson that we should consider also. ‘Israel’ means ‘prince with God’, and yet in reality Israel were actually acting as “the prince of this world”, the total opposite to their holy calling as a national people; they were princes *against* God and His Christ! This is the contrast that is being presented. The people had failed in their responsibilities to their God.

A person or nation’s heritage means nothing, it is one’s behaviour that will be judged, and Israel had to learn this. Just because they were Abraham’s seed did not guarantee salvation, for they did not do the works of Abraham. They had killed the Christ and so they (and their children) were to suffer the consequences. They had to learn that the princes of this world come to nought.

The same lesson applies to all of God’s children; we can profess to be His people, and yet we need to examine ourselves closely, for “many be called, but few chosen” (Mt. 20:16). The day of judgement is fast approaching, just like it was for the Jewish nation. Are we on the Lord’s side? Are we princes with God?

The irony is that Christ came to save those who killed him; his own received him not. The princes of this world killed the Prince of life and peace (Acts 3:15; Isa. 9:6). The true Israel were the disciples and those who heeded Christ’s message and the teaching of the apostles through the Holy Spirit. This is surely a warning for our days. There are two camps here; which one are you standing in? Are you a prince with God or a prince of this world? “Him hath God exalted with His right hand to be a Prince and a Saviour, for to give repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins” (Acts 5:31).

1. Some modern versions (ASV, ESV, NKJV) translate this word (*eleḡchō*) as ‘convict’.