

9-8-2019 Playing Chess...and The End Game

© J. Takahashi

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

When I just started serving the Church, one of the bishops I know loved to play chess. So whenever he came to my parish, he said, "Father John, let's play chess." So we sat and played chess, and every single day when he stayed with us, we played chess. He's a great chess master. I could tell because he told me certain things, "You should not do this and you should do this." The rest, when he started playing, he started showing up, kind of set up a situation that you learn certain moves. So without verbally telling, "Do this or do that. Oh, maybe you should not move that bishop there or here, or you should not a move that rook there," no verbal instructions, but he adjusted everything so that I learned each piece, how to move.

When I'm interested at something, I started hitting books and learn about what I'm working on. As soon as I started learning chess, I started hitting books and I found out chess is a very, very serious game. It's not just ordinary game because there are some academic books with references and footnotes, and then some of them are this thick. You may be surprised. Chess is that serious. There are two things I learned from these books is that, one, when you start a game you have to know this game is going to end. Novice players don't just not think about the end, checkmating the opponent, but you just keep playing. So just lose in the middle of the game, maybe even in the beginning game. So you have to know that this game is going to end and I'm going to checkmate your opponent. So that's the objective.

Then, secondly, I realized or learned there are three games in one game, each game has its own rule. The way it works, it's very different. So one game is not just one game, but there are three games: beginning game, middle game and ending game. You have to know how to play each game. Otherwise, you will keep playing beginning game all the way, and unfortunately you will not go to end game because beginning game, if you only know about beginning game, your game will not progress and abruptly you'll be checkmated.

So these, first, we have to know that there is an end to this game and then there are three games in one game. Then it dawned on me, "Oh, this is something like our life," supposedly, if we live 90 years. If we attend the service at matins every single day, we hear that our life has an end. Also, I like to point out, in monasticism, that's the first thing a young monk learns: remember God and remember death. But just remember, death is not something kind of morbid, dreadful end of a life, but rather checkmate your master. Who is our master? Chess master is Christ our Lord Himself. So if we play well, our life is very enjoyable and then I started learning, like, "Oh, when you play with someone who is really good, you really enjoy every minute of it: beginning game, middle game, and the ending game. Even if you are checkmated, in the end was really satisfying.

So our life is something like chess game. It has beginning game, and middle game, and ending game. Now, beginning game, and when I hear this young man came to Jesus and asked how to live eternal life, and this means, for me, it's like a, "How do I checkmate our Lord?" It could be said, because Jacob, do you remember what he did with our Lord when he came? He wrestled with him and in the end he was called Israel. So you wrestle with God throughout your life. So we play this game with our Lord, and our Lord is a chess master who knows how to teach us without verbal contact.

9-8-2019 Playing Chess...and The End Game

© J. Takahashi

Have we ever heard that when we are doing something wrong, a voice from heaven comes, "What are you doing?" No, we never heard. The only thing we heard is like the people saying, "The Bible says this. God says this. Don't do this. Don't do that. But, God, never in our life, right in the midst of our mischievous activities, he will never show up and say, "Don't do this." But, rather, if we are clever and in which game we are in, then we think about, "Oh, I am in the beginning game so I should do this," or, "In the middle game, I'm supposed to do this; and the end game, I should understand this." Lord, our God, will show us in our life and we know. That's the way He talks to us.

Therefore, this man comes, Mr. Perfect comes to our Lord and said, "What should I do to gain eternal life?" Now, this eternal life is not something when we die and then we go into eternal life, but he is talking about eternal life today, here and now. In our Western thinking, eternity is something like something that is finite, it ends, then it becomes infinite. So like eternity is after this. But in the Orthodox Church, since Christ, our Lord came, eternity is with us and we are in it. That's why I mentioned once before that the church counts one day, eight hours, eight hours and the monasticism. Like, for example, like eight hours sleep, eight hours prayer, and eight hours labor, and then eight days a week. Do you remember? Eight tones, so eight weeks as one season, and we are in the second season, do you remember, the second season of the third Sunday. Therefore, we are constantly entering into eternity and this is proclaimed in church in every service, like in vespers, matins, Divine Liturgy twice, there's an entrance. The priest goes in and, as I mentioned before, that when he goes in, he's not going all by himself but all of us together, but we cannot all fit in there.

That's why we don't all go, but the priest goes in, and so we remember that our life is constant entry into eternal life. Now, in order to understand this, this Mr. Perfect comes to our Lord, Lord said, in order to gain this eternal life, what we have to do is to keep the commandments, and not only keeping commandments, he just mentions five commandments, and the last five, and the sixth is love your neighbor as yourself. That is the sixth commandment. This Mr. Perfect said, "I did all that." Why did he come to our Lord? He was about to end his first game. So he did a good job in his first beginning game, and then he came to our Lord and asked, "Now what?" So I'm about to go into the middle game. Although it says young man, but you can tell that this young man answered, "I've done all of these since my youth." So he's coming into the middle age and the middle game, and asking, "Now, what should I do?" So this is Mr. Perfect is just about finished beginning game perfectly.

Now, there is somebody we know who messed up her beginning game big time. We hear the life of Saint Mary. Do you remember? Her life, the beginning game is just totally, we call it kind of messed up. But she realized, as she came into the middle game, she realized what happened to her life. Then she started working on it and she overcame what she did in the beginning game, in the middle game, and then end game. She played perfectly and checkmated our Lord. So in the beginning game, we have to learn how to open up doors, which doors you are supposed to open, and which doors you're not supposed to open. Then if you open up the wrong door, you're going, but you have to learn how to come out.

So all these things we do in church, like taking compassion, saying prayers, and repenting and forgiving, and having a loving heart, and all these things we do after listening to our parents' teachings, more or less based on Ten Commandments and whatnot. After that, in the middle

9-8-2019 Playing Chess...and The End Game

© J. Takahashi

game, what is the problem we have in the middle game, in another words, middle age, between 30 and 60, is we accumulate a lot of baggage in the beginning game. A lot of things happened in the beginning game, good things and bad things. However, in the middle game, between 30 and 60, we have to sort out everything and get rid of the things we don't need for this journey further into the end game. That's what Christ our Lord said, "Sell everything and give it to the poor." Then that's showing that learning to get rid of everything we accumulated in the beginning game and the middle game, then we'll be all clear in ourselves standing in front of God without any concerns. That is a time we start entering eternal ... that is a time we realize that we are coming into eternal life really.

Middle game is very important because we are preparing ourselves for the end game. We are going to checkmate our Lord, chess master. The ending game is really important because in the middle game, after getting rid of everything, just like Christ, our Lord said, "You just get rid of everything and then follow me," and we continue following. The ending game, the board is pretty much clear, the children are gone, grandchildren are gone, and then some sometimes wife is gone, husband is gone, and yourself and then what you have, good job is gone, and life is quite spacious. That is a time we work on ourselves, so that we will be able to see what life is all about. This realization of what life is all about gives us the vision of our end, checkmate our master. That vision is a vision of dedication, transfiguration and resurrection.

As we approach the end game, the end of end game, we see clearly why Christ, our Lord, came to us and lived our life and died and resurrected, so that we'll be able to be blessed with this vision of transfiguration, dedication, and resurrection. Our end is not abrupt end of a stupid life, stupid death and stupid life. This is recorded by the Orthodox theologians like Tolstoy said, but our life, daily, we are entering into eternal life and receiving joy. In the end game, we'll see clearly what life is all about. It is that process of transfiguration and dedication, and then we'll see, checkmate our master, Christ, our Lord, as our resurrection. That is the joy of our Orthodox Christian life. Amen.