December 27, 2020

LEARNING TO SEE THE FIELD

Deuteronomy 7:21

INTRODUCTION

The Chinese claim that 2020 was “the year of the rat.” Then they gifted the world with covid 19, so maybe it was the year of the bat. However I think it should have been the year of the raccoon. Have you noticed that raccoons look like they are wearing a mask? And they compulsively wash their hands. Both of those are so 2020. Notice that you can rearrange the letters of the word “racoon” to spell “corona.” What a year it has been. This football season is the first one ever where there’s a penalty for not grabbing a face mask. This year Laurie and I decided not to go to Bora Bora because of the corona virus. Every other year of our lives we decided not to go there because we can’t afford it.

I have seen a few predictions about what will happen in 2021. The most reasonable is that in the second half of the year the vaccines will begin to blunt the pandemic and the result will be an explosion in consumer spending such as we have never seen. It has also been predicted that popular airfares will double beginning in July.

I saw a couple of predictions that were made about 2020. Back in 1951 *Popular Mechanics* magazine predicted that in 2020 every family would have at least one helicopter in their garage. Experts predicted 20 years ago that humans would land on Mars in 2020. What I did not find as I looked back on predictions about 2020 was that America would be locked down by a deadly global pandemic, and that it would experience massive civil unrest. Those were obviously the two biggest stories of this year, no one saw them coming. Which makes me think it is likely that we have no idea what awaits us in 2021. No doubt you have seen the stories in the news about the discovery of a new and even more contagious variant of the corona virus. One I read said it is possible this variation of the bug may not be susceptible to the current vaccines, which raises all kinds of concerns about what’s going to happen in 2021. How are we supposed to live in peace with this kind of uncertainty? How can we be hopeful about this new year? This isn’t a question unique to this year. It is just more obvious this year than most. We face that question every year, every single day in fact, for we have no idea what even the next day will bring us. We find some helpful thoughts in Deuteronomy 7:17-21.

EXPOSITION

KNOW THAT WE HAVE AN AWESOME GOD

1. These words are part of Moses’ instructions to the people of Israel as they stood at the borders of Canaan, the land God promised to them. A generation earlier the nation had been brought to that same spot. God told them to go in and conquer that land. He told them to start by sending in a special ops team to recon the land. That team came back with glowing reports about what a good place it would be to live. Numbers 13:27 said they reported that it flowed with milk and honey. But there was a big problem. While two of the recon team urged them to enter the land, the other 10 said it would be foolhardy to attempt to take over the land because there were some fierce people already living there. In Numbers 13:31 they said, “We can’t attack those people; they are stronger than we are.” In verse 33 they said, “We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them.” Caleb and Joshua told the people not to rebel against the Lord, but to obey him and go into the land. Numbers 14:10 says, “But the whole assembly talked about stoning them.” They wanted no part of attacking those giants that inhabited the land. They refused to go. So God told them since they refused to enter the land, they would spend the next 40 years out in the arid wilderness, and would not enter the Promised Land.
2. This passage happens 40 years after those events, and the people are right back at the same place where they had failed before. The land was still occupied by powerful tribes of people whom the Israelis were going to have to fight and defeat. In Deuteronomy 7:17 Moses says, “You may say to yourselves, ‘These nations are stronger than we are. How can we drive them out?’” It’s the same issue the previous generation had. Verse 21 speaks directly to that fear. “Do not be terrified by them, for the Lord your God, who is among you, is a great and awesome God.”
3. The solution to the problem was not new weaponry, more troops, better training, superior strategy and tactics. The solution was that their God is a great and awesome God. Their need in that stressful time was the same need we have as we are about to enter a new and uncertain year. In his book, *The Holy Wild*, Mark Buchanan said, “Our greatest need in times of need is to see the Lord.” It is to see God as he is and to see how great and awesome he actually is.
4. Psalm 145:3 says, “Great is the Lord and most worthy of praise; his greatness no one can fathom.” To fathom something means to measure the depth of it. To fathom the greatness of God is to measure the depth of it. David said in Psalm 145 that this is impossible. No one can measure it or comprehend it fully. The New American Standard Version says God’s greatness is unsearchable.
5. I know you’ll be surprised at this, but the situation of the Israelis reminds me of a football quarterback. A good quarterback is a rare animal, because they must have the ability to do things most of us can’t do. Few have the pure physical skill of being able to accurately throw a football a considerable distance with accuracy and velocity, to a receiver who is often moving extremely fast. There are 21 other players on the field, all moving as fast as they can in different directions. I can tell you that from standing on the field during a major college game what you see is utter chaos. Somehow the quarterback has to sort through all that movement and confusion to understand what is happening and where he needs to throw the ball. All of that is difficult. But there is one more large factor. He must sort through all of this while a number of very large, very athletic men, are doing their best to charge at him, maniacally intent on blowing him into the next century. To be successful the quarterback must be able to not look at those oncoming people. He has to keep his eyes downfield so he can see what is happening there. This means overcoming one’s sense of self preservation because those men who are very close and coming fast with malice in their hearts. You have to get your eyes off them and see the field. When a quarterback becomes focused on just avoiding the people rushing at him, he loses his ability to do his job.
6. For the Israelis, the people inhabiting the promised land were like the onrushing defensive behemoths. Compared to those people they felt like grasshoppers. Moses told them that they needed to get their eyes off the behemoths and see the field. Actually what they most needed to see was how awesome their God was.
7. From the very beginning of my ministry there have been a few things that I have wanted to be the marks of it, the message I wanted to get across. One crucial focus for me has always been the grace of God. I believe that the most significant force for us becoming what God wants us to be is being astounded, humbled, overwhelmed and overjoyed by the grace of God. Another is that I have wanted us all to love each other, for if we don’t do that, whatever else we do is hollow and hypocritical. But there is one more great desire I have had, and that is that we all would live in awe of the greatness of God.
8. Unfortunately, it is easy to have a belief in the greatness of God that is academic. Yes, I know God is great. He is all powerful, all knowing, eternal. He is holy, he is just, he is good. We know all this, but we know it in our heads, and that’s about as far as it gets. We don’t *feel* that in our souls. We don’t fall on our faces in astonishment before his greatness. We are not astounded and in awe of him.
9. It’s hard for us today to experience awe. Our world is very human centered, very fast moving, exceedingly demanding and very pre-occupied with things that ultimately don’t matter much. We don’t have time to stand in awe of anything, and because we are so human centered, not much actually creates awe in us.
10. Can you think of moments in your life where you actually felt awe? I’ve seen some sunsets that are so spectacular the beauty leaves me speechless. Saying, “That’s incredible, it is so beautiful,” is the kind of thing I usually manage to come up with, but it doesn’t even get close to what I feel. It is utterly inadequate. We have seen the reflection of a full moon on the ocean that is so profoundly gorgeous that again, I am stunned by it. I’m in awe, and can’t even put into words what I feel. There have been some other moments. When Laurie and I first lived here in this area we had no money so we used to look for things to do that didn’t cost anything. One that we did several times was to go down to the airport. You used to be able to park at the end of the runway and watch the planes come in. That was great, but the thing that really stuck with me was when a jet took off. The roar of those powerful engines was, well, thunderous, and it left us awestruck.
11. Israel needed to have that kind of experience with their God. They knew the stories of how God had acted visible and powerfully a generation earlier. Academically, mentally, they agreed that God was great. But it was hard for them to take their eyes off the giants and see God. God was not visible to them, not tangible, but those giants in the land, the fierce people who were living there, were obvious, very tangible, and scary.

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1. The way people most often come to know God’s greatness, to feel it in their bones, is to find themselves in a situation where they see no way out, they have no hope, and God shows up in an astounding way. It is Israel standing at the Red Sea knowing they were about to be destroyed, and then God showed up. It is the disciples of Jesus in the boat that was going down in a storm, panicking and waking Jesus up because he needed to be awake when they all died, and then watching Jesus stop that storm dead in its tracks with a word. We gain a sense of the greatness of God when we have no way to save ourselves, and God shows up to save us. This is unfortunate because most of us work desperately hard to make sure we are never in a situation where our backs are against the wall, we are out of resources and ideas, and our only hope is for God to rescue us. We avoid that because it is frightening and we hate being that vulnerable and helpless. What if God doesn’t come through? But those are the kinds of occasions that create true awe of God.
2. But we should also notice that this verse doesn’t say anything about feelings. It states a fact. Our God is a great and awesome God. What we need to do is put our focus on that fact. We need to see God as the God who created the unimaginably vast universe, who parted the sea, who entered human history and demonstrated power over nature, who conquered death itself. Instead of viewing our lives and our world through the lens of our immediate circumstances, we need to see them through the lens of the might and power of God who rules over all.
3. I am dismayed by how much my peace can be disrupted by such minor provocations. Some pretty trivial things can cause unreasonably large tremors in my soul. I had a recent example of this. One thing that Laurie and I have been dealing with this year is the technical challenges of live streaming worship services. We decided to do something different for our Christmas Eve service, and it involved more people and more complex technology. Most people would have not fretted over it, but the night before we recorded that I woke up in the middle of the night and could not go back to sleep. All these questions about how this was going to work crowded into my brain, scenarios of total disaster kept running through my head. How is this going to work? What if that happens? Do we have the equipment we need? I told myself this is not a big deal. If it flops we’ll just do plan B, whatever that might be. It didn’t help. I was stressed, and no matter how much I told myself to not be stressed and to go back to sleep, it didn’t work. It’s amazing how little effect logic and reason have on anxious thoughts, especially in the middle of the night. Fortunately in the morning I finally started doing what this verse said to do. I started to view the situation through the lens of having a great and awesome God. If God wants this to succeed he can overcome all my technical deficiencies, and if he doesn’t want it to, then neither do I. I got back some sanity and balance in my head.
4. The most helpful thing we can do as we approach this year is to live in awe of our great and awesome God, and view all of life as ruled by him.

KNOW THAT GOD IS AMONG US

1. The second thing this verse says that is crucial is that “the Lord your God” is “among you.” It would have been easy for the people of that generation to say, “Yes, we’ve heard about all the plagues in Egypt. We’ve heard about the Passover. We’ve heard about the parting of the Red Sea. But that was then. This is now. We haven’t seen anything dramatic and obvious like that. We don’t see God.”
2. You and I might say, “Um, excuse me, but you’ve been eating manna out in the wilderness for 40 years. How could you say you don’t see God at work? Every day you’ve been eating a miracle!” But what happens if people experience a miracle every day of their lives for 40 years? It doesn’t look like a miracle to them. It just becomes normal to them. It’s what they expect. For most of these people there had never been a time when they didn’t have manna to eat. So they kind of took it for granted, just assuming it’s how things always were in that wilderness.
3. We read in the Bible about the many powerful things God has done in this world. But that was then, this is now. We don’t see God. He’s not obvious in the circumstances of our lives. He’s not doing anything dramatic and obvious.
4. The issue for us is the same as it was in Moses’ day. They needed to believe that God was among them, and so do we. We need to believe that he is still with us and still the same all-powerful God that he was when he did those things. We need to know that he is real and at work in our world. We need to believe that he still cares about his people, and that he told the truth when he said he would always be with us.
5. While Israel’s first big battle against the people of Canaan would feature a miracle, most of their battles would be fought by human beings. There would be no obvious miracles, but God saw to it that they won those battles. That is how God still works most of the time. We face our battles. Most of them will be fought by us, regular old human beings. But what we need to know is that God is among us. We’ve just celebrated the birth of Emmanuel, which means God with us. We need to believe that he is with us, even though we may not see him acting overtly in the world.
6. Our little grandson, Wesley, is the very definition of a toddler. He has only been walking for a month or so. He’s a lot better than he was a few weeks ago, but he’s still learning and growing steadier. He really likes walking. He loves to just walk all around the house. He gets a kick out of the novelty of actually being able to walk upright. For a little guy like him the world presents all sorts of hidden and unknown dangers. He doesn’t know how close he is to disaster much of the time. He tools around sure that he is navigating this world all on his own ability. What he doesn’t realize is that Nana or Yapaw is following close behind him, ready to catch him if he falls or to step in if he gets into trouble. He is not even aware of us, but we are there. That’s kind of how it is with us. We think we’re navigating our way through this world all on our own ability, blithely unaware of all the disasters that we are flirting with, and even more unaware of the fact that our Father is right there with us, watching us and protecting us.

APPLICATION

How can we face each new day with confidence and peace? The key is living in awe of our awesome God. What can we do that will help us do that so that we can live with the peace and power of a life in the presence of our almighty God?

WORSHIP

1. I direct your attention back to Psalm 145 where we saw the statement that no one can fathom the greatness of God. Here is what David said in verses 1-2 as he considered the greatness of God. “I will exalt you, my God the King. I will praise your name for ever and ever. Every day I will praise you and extol your name forever and ever.” David said he would exalt, praise and extol God forever.
2. The statement “Every day I will praise you” is particularly important. David was saying he would praise God every day. It would become the way he lived. His life would be about exalting God and bringing honor to him. In other words, the reasonable response to a great and awesome God is to worship him.
3. In many ways worship is analogous to loving someone. I have noticed that to really love my wife involves both actions and words.
4. Recently, for instance, there was an occasion when I was watching a football game on television. Laurie was in the room and was speaking to me. But I was watching the game and unfortunately had the sound on, and I was hearing the things the announcers were saying. This was a tactical error. Most of the time sports announcers don’t actually have anything to say that is particularly worth hearing. With football, they always say things like, “Jim, they have to be more physical.” Saying you have to be more physical to win a football game is as deep as saying, “Well, Jim, to win this game they’re going to have to score more points than the opponent.” Really? What a brilliant insight! Why hasn’t someone explained that before? My point is listening to the guys on TV is not of much importance. However, Laurie became aware that I was not listening to her. That, it turns out, is of great importance. She doesn’t feel loved when I don’t listen to her. My actions did not express love. By the way, this is not a uniquely Laurie thing or a woman thing. I don’t feel loved if she doesn’t listen to me. My point here is that love is often expressed through actions.
5. But what I say is also important. Recently one day I mentioned to Laurie how much I appreciate specifically several things she does, and I know that she does them to express love to me. It was obvious how she felt about me expressing love and appreciation to her. So love needs to be expressed verbally as well.
6. Worship is the same. We worship God by our actions. When we seek to honor him by obeying him, by living in such a way that it brings glory to him, we are worshiping. Similarly we worship God by expressing how great he is, honoring him with what we say.
7. One of the most important things we can do is to worship God with our lives and our words, to put our minds and our efforts into declaring how great God is. It reminds us that he is great and he is with us. As we do that it takes our minds and our eyes off those onrushing defensive players that seem so intent on destroying us, and helps us to see the field. It helps us see life from heaven’s perspective. And from that perspective we are never in danger. We are as safe as little Wesley is with a parent or grandparent right there with him as he toddles through the world.
8. Nothing will help us put in perspective whatever happens next year as much as living with worship as our mindset and our priority. As we praise God we direct our own minds and hearts to remembering that God is at work, that he is greater than whatever happens in the world. It will enable us to be at peace and to be hopeful no matter what may come.

EXPECT

1. In order for ancient Israel to attempt to defeat the enemies they were going to face they had to expect God to do something. They had to expect that he was great enough to affect things in their world, that he was with them and would act to make victory possible for them.
2. Consider that first big battle when they had to attack the strongpoint of Jericho. How would they defeat that fortress like city? God came up with a strange tactic. Have them march around the city once a day for 6 days with some priests blowing trumpets and the ark of the covenant out in front of them. The 7th day they were to march around the city 7 times, and then they were to all shout.
3. Pretty clever strategy, huh? Wait, just march around the city for a week? What possible good could that do? Are we going to try to make the enemy dizzy or something? This is ridiculous. I’ve never heard of anyone trying to conquer a city by marching around it 13 times. They had to trust that God was going to make something happen in order to do that. They had to expect him to act. Of course, he did, and the rest is history.
4. But what do we mean when we say we need to expect God to be great and to act in our lives? Does that mean that we expect God to do miracles and make sure we win every battle, make sure that everything goes the way we want it to? No, God doesn’t promise us that. He promises to give us strength, wisdom and comfort, to use events to shape our character, and to somehow bring good from everything that happens. We should expect him to do all of that.
5. We can expect him to be at work in this world, to be greater than the forces we see at work in our world, so we don’t have to feel threatened or even unsettled by them. We should expect him to be present with us in everything, to strengthen us and enable us to stand firm and survive, and to use us for his glory and his plan.
6. There are Christians who not only expect but almost demand that God do miracles, and that he do them at their beck and call. This tends to result in a lot of ersatz miracles and unsubstantiated stories of miracles that you can never pin down with names, dates and places. It doesn’t take long for that to look pretty phony.
7. But we can err in the other direction and think that God not only never does miracles, he never acts in our world at all. Then we get to a place where we don’t expect to see God’s hand at all. We end up being not much different than atheists, except with a theological veneer.
8. Our culture believes that the physical world is a totally closed system. There is only the material world, and since there is nothing else nothing can break into this closed, material system. Talk of miracles or of God acting in any way in our world is nothing more than foolish superstition. We become influenced by that thinking, in part because for the most part we don’t see God work in any overt way, so we conclude he isn’t acting.
9. I’m not a big miracles guy. In the early years of our ministry there was a young guy who was something of a wild man, a bit of a joker in the deck. He wasn’t the most prudent of people. He was a drummer in a rock band, but at one point he broke his arm. This sidelined him from the drumming business, as you can imagine. But during that time he was hanging around with a group of “name it and claim it” Christians who believed God would do miracles if they only had faith. They insisted this guy needed to have faith that God would heal his broken arm. They prayed for him, and hallelujah, he felt better. They said his arm was healed and he believed it! He took his cast off and played drums at a gig his band was doing. The day after that he was in excruciating pain because he had stressed his still broken arm, and had to have the doctor put another cast on it. Nice miracle.
10. Having said that, the scriptures insist this is not a closed system. God can and does act in this world. We can know there is more than the material world if we will pay attention to what happens. A few months ago a terrible tragedy struck a family that are friends of our daughter in law, Anna. They had 5 kids. They were driving on a trip home late one night and were in a horrible accident. Two of the children died. After Anna learned of the tragic events at one point she was looking at a picture of the family. Ella came over and looked at the picture, pointed at the two kids who had died, and said, “What happened to those two?” Anna hadn’t talked about the incident. She asked Ella how she knew something had happened to those two kids, and she said, “I don’t know. I just know.” Well that’s just weird. How do you explain that? It’s just a small reminder that a lot happens that cannot be explained with a purely material worldview.
11. Something happened in 2 Kings 6 that we need to happen in our lives.
12. Aram, a neighbor country, went to war against Israel. But they concluded they had a mole because Israel kept thwarting their plans like they knew them. It appeared to be a serious intelligence problem. But one of the king’s advisors informed him the problem wasn’t a spy, it was the prophet Elisha. God was revealing to him everything they planned to do. There was a simple solution to that. Kill Elisha. The king sent a “strong force” to terminate him with extreme prejudice. The next morning Elisha’s servant got up and discovered they were surrounded by a large force of enemy soldiers. He freaked out. In verses 16-17 it says, “Don’t be afraid, the prophet answered. Those who are with us are more than those who are with them. And Elisha prayed, Open his eyes, Lord, so that he may see. Then the Lord opened the servant’s eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.” Those chariots of fire were there all the time, he just couldn’t see them. Elisha knew they were there, so he never worried.
13. That suggests to me that as we go through life God’s chariots of fire are out there. We don’t see them, but that doesn’t mean they aren’t there. What we need to do is ask that God open our spiritual eyes so that we can see that God’s forces are with us.
14. We can and should expect to see God at work in 3 ways.

First, he will be with us and will comfort, encourage, guide and strengthen us through life if we look to him. He will be there making us more like Christ through the events of life.

Second, he will be at work in circumstances in ways we won’t always see or understand. This year has introduced some less than wonderful circumstances into our family’s life. Toby and Anna have had some problems with housing that have been really disruptive. Meanwhile, because of the meltdown in the airline industry, Michael got assigned to a new aircraft and a new base. His new base is New York, which is awful. He had to leave on Thanksgiving Day to train for a month for this new airplane, and got home on Christmas Eve. While in Atlanta training he found out he’s being reassigned to another plane, still based in New York. Which means in March he will have to go back to Atlanta for yet another month of training, then he’ll still have commute to New York to work. It’s awful. But for all of our kids, what they most need to do is to expect that somehow God is at work even in all of this. Laurie and I have seen throughout our lives that even when difficult, disappointing or even grievous things have happened, God was at work. Sometimes it is about changing us, sometimes it is about teaching us, sometimes it is about strengthening our faith by seeing him work in the situation, and sometimes it is about setting up something down the right that we are glad about.

Third, God will be at work using us. If we listen to him, obey his prompts, we will see God use us in interesting ways. There have been times in my life when I’ve had a sense God wanted me to call a person. I’ve done it, but they didn’t answer, so I’ve just left a message. I’ve had experiences where a person called back a couple of weeks later and said, “I was in tough time and was right at a crucial point when you called. You said just the right thing. It was like God was caring about me and it was just what I needed.” That was not me being spiritual or smart, it was just expecting that God will use me if I listen and act.

1. Francois Fenelon at one point wrote to God, “Help me to see you everywhere.” If we will open our eyes and trust, if we ask God to help us see him, we will see him at work in our lives.

PRAY

Back in Psalm 145 in verses 13-14 David wrote, “The Lord is trustworthy in all he promises and faithful in all he does. The Lord upholds all who fall and lifts up all who are bowed down.” God is there to be trusted and he upholds us. In verse 15 David wrote, “The eyes of all look to you.” That is what we need to do in whatever situation we face. We need to pray, to look to God.

Luke 18:1 says, “Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up.” We should always pray, and we should not give up. It will be easy to give up sometimes, because we might have to wait for God’s timing, which is not ours. But as Paul wrote in 1 Thessalonians 5:17 we should pray continually, or as some other translations put it, pray without ceasing.

In 1853 Scottish pastor, Andrew Bonar, wrote in his book, *Heavenly Springs*, “There is no hope but in prayer. Herein lies the church’s power against the world.” Charles Spurgeon, the famous British preacher, said that one of the first signs of God’s absence in a church or in a life will be laziness in prayer. Let’s not be lazy in prayer, but let’s ask God to work.