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WAY TOO BIG FOR THE TALE OF THE TAPE

Ephesians 3:20-21

This has been a stressful year for Laurie and me. The biggest issue has been my health. Dealing with cancer and its treatments makes for a difficult time of life, to put it mildly. It’s a disturbing thing to know there are cells inside my body that are trying to kill me, and that my God given immune system cells, aided by some medicines, are trying to fight them off. It’s like an invasion, and my defenses are try to defeat it. At times I imagine I can almost feel the battle going on. There is no guarantee of how the battle will turn out. But added to that we had some scary moments over the health of Bria, our youngest granddaughter. On top of it all Laurie has had a series of battles with some frustrating illnesses. We had planned last year to have a vacation that we’ve long dreamed of, going to Hawaii with kids and grandkids. That trip got repeatedly postponed due to a pregnancy and illnesses. In the last couple of weeks we finally got to go. This trip was kind of a pause in a stressful ordeal that will last a year. It was a time for me to reflect on what is most important in life, on what we most need to do when going through the deep water of life. Today I want to talk a bit about that.

The first week of our trip Laurie and I were specifically there to take care of our grandsons, Wesley and Hunter. We were excited about doing that, but we also knew it would be tiring, and it was. So the plan was for Laurie and me to take 4 days to rest and recover, just the 2 of us. Given all the stress and uncertainty of the past year we wanted this to be special. So we arranged for a room at a beautiful hotel with a “deluxe ocean view.” When we checked in, Junie, the very nice woman desk clerk, offered us an upgraded room that sounded lovely, but it was at a cost. We were already splurging, so we thought a deluxe ocean view, not a partial ocean view, or even an ocean view, would be fine. She told us if we changed our minds we should let her know and she would take care of it.

I suspect she knew what we didn’t. We walked into our room and it was very nice, but the view was not deluxe. It was nice, and while we could see the ocean, the view wasn’t amazing. I don’t care what the hotel said, it was not deluxe. We told ourselves it was fine, but we were disappointed. We looked at each other, and said, “Let’s call Junie.”

She told us to come back to the front desk and she would arrange everything. So we were transferred to a room completely on the opposite side of the large hotel. We walked into the new room and it took my breath away. The view wasn’t deluxe, it was stupendous. We went out on the lanai where we could hear the waves breaking and gazed on a vast expanse of ocean stretching before us. It was a scene so impressive and so beautiful that it is too big for my words to explain. Have you ever had that experience of being in awe to the degree that it leaves you slack jawed and wordless? It’s something that gets deeply planted in your heart and your mind. Today I want to talk about something far greater than a beautiful vista, and it is something so awesome that is not just jaw dropping, it is heart and life changing. We get a glimpse of what I mean in Ephesians 3:20-21.

THERE IS NO TAPE MEASURE FOR GOD

In Ephesians 3:14-19 Paul wrote what he prayed for the Ephesian Christians. In verse 16 he prayed that they would be strengthened with power in their inner being through the Holy Spirit. They needed to be strengthened because life was not easy for them. The church was made up mostly of poor people who had no real hope that their living conditions would ever improve. They had put their faith in Jesus Christ, and this actually made life harder for them. They were in a small minority in their culture. They were misunderstood and viewed with suspicion by many. Many of them had been ostracized by their own families and friends because of their beliefs. Standing firm in the faith was difficult for them because of the opposition and hardships they faced on a daily basis.

What Paul prayed in verses 17-19 was key to being strengthened so they could stand firm in the faith. He asked that they would be able to grasp how massive is God’s love for his people. He wanted them to not just mentally be aware that God loved them, but to experience it, to live in the reality of it. He prayed this so that they might be “filled to the measure of all the fulness of God.” Well how full is that? What tape measure do you use to determine how big and how full God is?

Back in the olden days they used to refer in baseball to tape measure home runs. These weren’t run of the mill home runs that just sneak over the fence and land in the second row of seats beyond it. They were prodigious blasts that sailed far beyond the fence. I don’t think anyone ever got out a tape measure to determine just how far a home run traveled, but for some reason that was the term used to describe them. Today they use computers and algorithms to project how far a home run would travel. The two most prodigious home runs I’ve seen in person were hit by players on opposing teams, one when I was in high school, and one in college. That second one was a truly stupendous blast. We had a big field that had a sloping bank up to the 8 foot high fence in left. This home run, hit by a guy from UCLA, easily cleared that fence, then the 10 feet of space beyond it, then it cleared the large 4 lane road with a center median and the 10 feet of open space beyond that. Then there was another 8 foot high fence and about 20 feet of open ground. Beyond that was a rock quarry. The ball sailed well into that quarry. I wish I could have measured how far that thing went, but I couldn’t. I can tell you it went way beyond the barrier of our fence. Ridiculously beyond it. My estimate, and it’s just a guess, is that thing had to have flown at least 460 feet. But the point Paul makes in this passage is that there is no tape measure, no computer, no algorithm that can gauge how big and how full God is.

In verse 20 Paul described God as being, “immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine.” The Greek word translated “immeasurably more” is interesting. It is a long word. In Greek it is *huperekperissou*. The root of the word is *perissos*, which meant extraordinary, remarkable, abundant to the point of being profuse. I think of what has happened in our back yard this spring. We got a perissos amount of rain this past winter, which has led to having a perissos amount of weeds. We have lived in our house for 32 years and we have never had weeds like this. We had weeds as tall as I am. In places the weeds were truly profuse, overgrowing everything. It has been a perissos kind of year. I’m sure you saw pictures of Mammoth and Tahoe where the snow was so deep, so perissos, that it actually buried the ski lift towers. At the peak of Mammoth Mountain they got 870 inches of snow. That’s over 72 feet of snow. Taller than a 7 story building. This is remarkable. Exactly. We have a profuse amount of weeds in our yard and Mammoth has an extraordinary amount of snow. Extraordinary and profuse is the base idea of the measure of Gods ability and power. It is truly beyond human measure.

But that’s just the root of the word. Paul didn’t leave it there. He added the preposition “ek” onto the front of that word. That meant “out of” or “from” usually, but when tacked onto this word it had the effect of strengthening it, so it was like adding the word “excessively” to it. So now God is excessively extraordinary or profuse. But Paul wasn’t done yet. He added yet another preposition to the front of the word. He put the word “huper” on it. In English that is hyper. We all know what that means. So now Paul has the word hyper excessively profuse or abundant to describe God’s great power. Really, there is no way we can translate that exactly into English. The point is, God’s power goes infinitely beyond.

Are you familiar with gamma ray bursts? These are the most massive explosions ever observed. Our sun produces an almost inconceivable amount of energy. The largest nuclear bomb ever made was produced by the Soviet Union. It was a 50 megaton monster of a bomb. That’s the equivalent of 50 million tons of TNT. It had more destructive power than all the ordinance expended in World War 2 combined. The astounding power of the sun can be seen in the fact that it emits a billion times more energy than that massive bomb, *every second!* It is like setting off a billion of those huge bombs every second of every day, 365 days a year. This is where we get our minds blown by gamma ray bursts. A gamma ray burst can emit in a few seconds as much energy as the sun will release in its entire lifespan, estimated at 10 billion years. That’s a billion times a 50 megaton nuclear blast, times 31.5 million seconds a year, times 10 billion years. This is inconceivable, unmeasurable, raw power. Oh, but this is a rare event right? Wrong. According to NASA on average one is detected every day.

Why would God have these mind boggling, massive displays of power going on in the universe when for much of human history people had no way of knowing they were even happening? We don’t know why. Maybe they play some crucial role in how the universe operates. Or maybe God decided that about the time human beings began to think they were awesome because they have unlocked the power of the atom and have ventured out into space, he will make them aware of power that is infinitely beyond their comprehension. The literally inconceivable power of gamma ray bursts is evidence of God’s incomprehensible hyper excessive abundant power.

What does this power have to do with us? First, it reminds us of how little we actually control in life. We live with the illusion that if we can just pull all the right levers we can protect ourselves and we can make life go the way we want. That is a foolish illusion. One gamma ray burst in our galactic neighborhood and that is the end not only of our illusion that we can control things, but of us and everyone else. It is good that God wants to disabuse us of that notion, because it is a selfish illusion and we are better off living with reality.

Paul is making the assertion that the astounding thing is that God’s massive, incredible power is accessible to us if we ask. His power is literally unlimited. There is nothing we can ever ask that is too hard for him to accomplish. He has the power to create life literally out of nothing. He has the power to control a universe that is complex beyond our understanding and so immense we can’t come close to actually understanding its size. He has the power to bring his dead Son back to life. If his power is that great, is there really anything we could ever ask him that would be out of his reach?

Paul even upped the ante on that one. He said God’s power is so great it can do more than we can even dream. The implication of this is that God wants us to ask him, to trust him to use his power to answer our prayers. This is something he stated specifically in Philippians 4:6 where he told us to not be anxious about anything, but to make our requests about everything to God instead. In other words, pray about everything!

But this raises an obvious objection. There have been many times that there were things that I have dreamed and asked of God, but have seen no evidence of this supposed immense power work to answer what I asked. In fact, it feels like most of the time I don’t see much of that power at work.

How are we to believe in this mighty power when we don’t see it at work the way we might like? It should help if we back up a few verses to Ephesians 3:10. There Paul wrote, “His (God’s) intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms.” The word translated “manifold” meant “many sided.” God is not just powerful, he is wise, and his wisdom has many aspects to it. It has more aspects than we can comprehend.

Romans 16:27 calls God “the only wise God.” In other words, everything he does is wise, and there is no one who is wise like he is. Jeremiah 10:7 says to God, “Among all the wise men of the nations and in all their kingdoms, there is none like you.” Romans 11:33 says, “Oh the depths of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and unfathomable his ways.” No one can know what he knows and be as wise as he is, and none of us can understand why he does what he does because we are not as wise as he is. He is the smartest person in every room he is in, which is every room in existence.

When we don’t understand why he doesn’t wield his awesome power to work according to our plan, which is obviously the wisest and best thing that could happen, we tend to question either his love for us or his ability to accomplish what we ask. What we should do is remember that he is wise, and when he doesn’t use his power like he’s a genie who must respond to our wishes, it is because if he did it would not be wise.

During our vacation we got to observe a human wrestling with wisdom beyond his understanding. In this case it was a mini human, our 3 year old grandson Wesley. He is a bright, cute, lively little guy, but he is also naturally timid. He has had some swimming lessons, and what he learned was the whole swimming thing is not his cup of tea. In a tropical resort with a huge, fun pool complex, he preferred to play with his toy truck on a big rock. His parents, however, have knowledge and wisdom beyond his understanding. They had a good plan for him that he did not understand or want. They wanted him to enjoy the water with them. They had some water wings for him to wear, but he wanted no part of it. There was resistance and tears. Eventually they got him to wear them. He didn’t trust them. But finally they got him to tentatively venture into the water. To his relief, he didn’t plunge into a watery doom. He found himself paddling safely around the pool to the cheers of his family. He got a huge grin on his face and soon was tooling around gleefully. The following days he was eager to go swimming. His wise parents did not accede to his request to avoid the pool because they knew what was best for him. For God to accede to all of our requests would be an abdication of divine responsibility and love. He responds out of wisdom and love, and even though we cannot always see it, we have to trust that in his wisdom he is carrying out a good plan for us.

But there is something else important for us to observe. The end of verse 20 says God’s power is at work *within* us. We think we don’t want that. We want God’s power to work outside us, not within us. Hey, Lord, use that explosive power to fix my life and make it fun and easy. God, however, is aiming at something different. He’s working to create life in us, to make us like his son, to give us the strength to stand firm in the middle of whatever comes our way. He is using his power to make us people who are fully alive, who have integrity, who love other people unconditionally, who have joy in the hearts, who love him and who exude his grace. This is more important than what happens to us, and it will have far more effect on other people.

THE RIGHT RESPONSE IS ALWAYS TO GIVE GOD GLORY

These verses mark a turning point in the book of Ephesians. Up to this point this letter has been about the amazing Gospel of Jesus Christ, how God made us spiritually alive in him through grace and grace alone. Beginning in the next verses Paul is going to write about how we should live in light of the gospel. It is going to be practical instruction. But the starting point for how we live is this truth that to God should be the glory in all things for ever and ever. All that we are and do should flow out of living for his glory.

According to Ephesians 1:5 God predestined us to be adopted as his children through Jesus Christ “to the praise of his glorious grace.” In 1:12 he said we were predestined according to his plan in order that we, “Might be for the praise of his glory.” In verses 13-14 Paul said he sealed us with the Holy Spirit “to the praise of his glory.” Do you get the idea?

The same message shows up in 1 Peter 2:9, which says, “You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.” Peter tells us that we have an incredible gift. We are God’s special possession, a people with an infinitely noble calling, and that is to declare God’s praise.

Job understood this. When everyone else was trying to figure out the explanation for the terrible tragedies that devastated his life, while his wife was giving up in despair, Job said, “The Lord gives and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.” He was saying whether I like what happens or not, whether it be an obvious blessing or a train wreck, my response must be to give glory to God. That is the right way to react to everything. It is why I am on the planet.

There are things that happen in all our lives that are good and bad and we don’t always know the reasons for them. Some of them are trivial, some of them are huge. We just had the inside of our living room painted in December. It hadn’t been painted in 15 years or more. Then came this winter’s deluge. It turned out that on one of the big windows on our stair well the seal had broken down. By the time we discovered it water had come in and made a mess of the paint and the wall board. This just a couple of months after we paid to have it all painted. Now we’re going to have to pay to have it all repaired and painted again. What should be our response to such an annoying event? May the name of the Lord be praised!

That was small. We’ve also had big. Last fall I was told I had melanoma. At that time we didn’t know how bad that was going to turn out to be. We still don’t, though it seems more hopeful than it did at first. What is to be our response? May the name of the Lord be praised. Our goal in everything that happens is to give God glory, in our attitude, our actions, and our words. This is our calling! This is what our lives are to be all about. No matter what we do, if we don’t do this, we are seriously missing the boat.

I watched a little of the NFL Draft recently. Not much, since I am now an NFL orphan with no team to root for. I was pleasantly surprised when several of the young men that were drafted in the first round, thus fulfilling their life long dream, were asked on national television how it felt and what they said was, “The first thing I want to do is give glory to God and thank him for this opportunity.” Well good for you, young man, for that is what it is all about.

That does raise a question though. The big question is why? Why is it so important that we give praise to God in everything? Why is this our highest calling? Why does God need so much praise? I get why I have an endless desire for praise, because I am a fallen person who longs to have people acknowledge my worth. Is God like me? Absolutely not. He is completely secure in his character and identity whether people praise him or not. Why then does this matter so much?

Because it is the right response. When we see or experience something wonderful, something beautiful, something awesome, the reasonable, even irresistible reaction is to express appreciation and praise. Have you ever been to a movie that was so good when it ended the audience clapped? I have. It happened last year when we saw the Top Gun sequel. Why do they do that? There is no one in the theater that had any part in making the movie. They’re not going to hear the applause. They do it because something good and excellent demands a response. The awesomeness, beauty, greatness of God demands a response of praise.

But there is more. There are 2 facts about humans that we should always keep firmly planted in our hearts and minds. The first is that we will worship something or someone. Something will have first place in our hearts. Something will be so important to us it will rule over everything else, take priority over everything else, and will be the determining factor in our decisions and even our emotions. That’s what it means to worship. Writer David Foster Wallace said, “In the day to day trenches of adult life, there is no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshiping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship.” Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “Everybody worships something. Have no doubt about that.”

The second crucial truth is that we become like what we worship, so we’d better be careful what we choose. Again, Emerson said, “It behooves us to be careful, for what we are worshiping we are becoming.” Seminary professor and writer Greg Beale wrote a book titled *We Become What We Worship*, and in it he wrote, “What people revere, they resemble, either for ruin or for restoration.” This is why classic Christian author, A. W. Tozer, wrote, “What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.”

Is this really true? I saw a little clip of som young boys who were playing youth baseball. They won the game they were playing and I noticed a couple of things about how they celebrated the win. Two of them put their arms up and kind of banged their biceps together. A couple of others jumped in the air while turning and sort of banged their sides together. Do you think it just popped into their minds to celebrate that way because it seems natural? I can tell you that in all my years in sports I never celebrated a win or a good play that way. Where did that come from? They watch Major League players. They admire them, and so they want to be like them. That is a small but telling example that we are becoming like that which we admire the most. We become like what we worship.

There is a big problem about worshiping anything other than the true God. It is that in the end we either worship God or we worship ourselves. We serve self. Serving self is the source of all the conflict and suffering humans inflict on each other. Learn the lesson of the airplane. We flew home from Hawaii on Thursday night. As is inevitable, there were some young kids, including a couple of babies, near us. I know babies are wonderful and we all love them, but there is a truth about them we also know. No one is happy to be near them on a long flight. A baby is a package of 100% unadulterated self. All they know is what they want. If they don’t get it they don’t ask how they can be considerate of other people, they just cut loose with ear splitting screams of protest. Would you say that creates peace and brings people together? It sends people scrambling for headphones to cut out the disturbing noise. It doesn’t endear people to them. Serving self always creates discord, it drives people apart. Here’s another airplane example. The plane arrives at the gate. In our case it was after a 5 hour flight. As soon as the seat belt sign is turned off, what happens? Some people immediately shoot out of their seats into the aisle and move forward. This meant people from behind me in the plane are now standing in the aisle by my seat, blocking me from getting out of my seat. This even though we all know they’re not going anywhere because the door isn’t going to be open for several minutes, and even if it were they’re only going to save maybe one minute of their lives. What I find interesting is my reaction to this. I know it’s going to happen, it happens every flight, and I know it doesn’t really matter. Despite that, every single time it causes me to feel irritated. It makes me think, “Hey, get back in your seat and wait your turn, you selfish churl.” Why is that? It’s because Mr. Stand In The Aisle by his action is saying he is more important than me. All that matters is what he wants, regardless of the fact that it inconveniences me so terribly. The point is, even small acts of serving self separate people.

Something else happened related to our trip that has implications in this matter. Because we were using frequent flyer miles we had to fly out of LAX. Talk about reasons to praise God, that wasn’t one of them. We parked our car at a lot up there that had shuttles to the airport. On our shuttle to the airport there was just the driver and a young guy who was on his phone on the bus with us. The driver was an Hispanic man. Laurie mentioned that we had been to church morning. He became very animated when he realized we were believers in Jesus. He quoted scripture, he even told us joke about being a pastor when he found out I was a pastor. When the young man ended his phone conversation he immediately eagerly said, “Are you guys talking about Jesus?” When we said yes, he happily joined in because he was another believer. On the trip home we got in late at night and only the driver was with us on the bus. He was from Ethiopia, and once again he was also a believer in Jesus who was happy to talk with us about how serving God is what matters. I found it a fairly amazing coincidence that everyone we were on those shuttles with were believers in Jesus. But I also noted something crucial. There was an Hispanic man, an African man, a white American man and us. Different races, from different places and different cultures, different ages, and none of that mattered. There was immediate connection between us. There was a sense of joy and togetherness. It was because we all knew and wanted to serve the same Lord.

We can either worship God, or we will serve self. Serving self drives people apart. It creates conflict and bad feelings and distance. Serving God brings people together, creates peace and joy. The only way to be rightly related to God is to worship him, to give him glory. For in doing so we acknowledge he is the true good. If we do not, we worship something that is not true good. This not only dishonors him, but it puts us on the path to become something less than truly good ourselves.

Here’s another reason why giving glory to God is so crucial. It actually increases joy in our lives. C. S. Lewis made the point that our enjoyment of beautiful things requires that we praise them. In fact, it is in the praising of them that we actually complete our joy. Our enjoyment of something or someone is not full until we have shared it with others.

As exhibit A I give you Facebook. I don’t do Facebook, but Laurie does and she shows me a lot of what she sees there. People post pictures of where they went out to eat, or of where they are on vacation and the beautiful things they have seen there. Why do they do that? Is it because they are narcissistic and they think the whole world breathlessly awaits the latest news on everything they do? I hope not. There are probably some people like that. But most people post things on Facebook because in so doing they get more joy from the wonderful experience they have had. In fact, if the experience is truly wonderful, it *demands* that they share it.

A few weeks ago Laurie accompanied me to the Moore’s Cancer Center where I had another infusion. Between the appointments that make up that event we had some empty time, so we went upstairs where there is a little café and got some lunch. After we ate we walked back down stairs. As we were walking down the stairs there was a young, attractive woman walking up. As she passed us she surprised us when she said to Laurie, “I have to tell you that you are absolutely gorgeous.” I turned and said to you, “You are so right. I couldn’t agree more.” She laughed. It made me happy to be able to praise Laurie, It actually increased my joy in her. Telling you that story this morning increases my joy in her, because when we love something or someone, praising that thing or person gives us joy. So guess what happens when we give glory to God? It does the same thing. It increases our joy in him and our love for him.

I will give you one more reason why giving glory to God is so crucial. It strengthens our faith in him. As we give God glory for his wisdom, his power, his faithfulness, his goodness, his love, his grace, his justice, it reminds us that all these things are true. It brings us back to rock solid trust in him in all things. Praising him is a powerful aid to living by faith and loving God.

Giving glory to God is not only the right thing to do, it is the healthiest thing we will ever do.

CONCLUSION

In his book, *In A Pit, With A Lion, On A Snowy Day,* Mark Batterson wtrote, “There are basically two types of people in the world: complainers and worshipers. And there isn’t much circumstantial difference between the two. Complainers will always find something to complain about. Worshipers will always find something to praise God about.”

Listen to that last statement again. Worshipers will always find something to praise God about. The most important thing for us is not so much what happens to us, but how we respond to it. Will we complain, or will we worship? If we worship God, praise him no matter what, seek to honor him in everything, we end up rightly related to him, we become more like him, we draw people together, we are strengthened and we fill our hearts with joy. If we complain, we fill our hearts with self pity, we discourage others, we dishonor God, and we become joyless people. And our lack of joy is contagious. It seems to me that worshiping is by far the better choice. As Paul said, to God be the glory in everything.