

WHAT THE HEAVENS SAY

16th in a Series on Ephesians called, "Messages to the Misfits"
Ephesians 3:20-21

As grandparents, Laurie and I have recently been immersed in the world of animated movies and TV shows. I'm sure some expert somewhere has a theory about this, but it is obvious that pre-schoolers and toddlers seem to have little or no interest in forms of entertainment that feature actual humans, and instead much prefer animated shows. Their entertainment diet consists almost exclusively of *PJ Masks*, *Mickey's Roadster Racers*, *The Little Mermaid*, *Tangled*, *Zootopia*, and *Toy Story* no matter what number. So their grandparents have become aficionados of the animated genre.

One of the absolute favorites is *Frozen*. There is a scene in that movie when Anna is searching in the frigid, snowy mountains for her sister, Elsa. In search of some warmth she stumbles into Wandering Oaken's Trading Post. While she is there a young man named Kristoff also enters in search of supplies. At one point in a disagreement with Oaken over the prices he charges, Kristoff calls him a criminal. Oaken, who is sitting behind his counter, seems to be a very mild mannered Nordic man. But when Kristoff calls him a criminal, he gets upset. He is no longer mild mannered, but more important, he stands up. And when he stands up both Kristoff and Anna realize they have gravely underestimated him. Standing at his full height, Oaken is huge, and makes for an exceedingly intimidating figure who absolutely dwarfs Kristoff. The next thing you see is Kristoff being thrown out of the shop into the snow by this huge man. There was way more to Oaken than Kristoff expected.

Today we are going to be reminded of the fact that it is easy for humans to underestimate God. Our problem is we can't see him at all. This causes us to think he is not present at times, but also to fail to perceive the reality of who he is. We will find out today that one of the most important things we can do in life is understand and appropriately respond to the true nature of God. Let's look at Ephesians 3:20-21.

HE'S BIGGER THAN YOU THINK

Paul has just prayed that we would be filled to all the fullness of God. He ends his prayer with praise to God that gives us a glimpse of what the fullness of God is really like, and gives him glory that is due him.

As Laurie and I were with Carissa in her hospital room a few weeks ago, she asked us a question that doesn't have any easy answers. She was facing the frightening reality that the medical staff at the hospital were preparing her for the possibility that she might give birth to her baby after only 24 or 25 weeks of pregnancy. The odds of the baby surviving

are only a little better than even at that point. Carissa had asked one of the doctors about what the effects of that would be on her child if he did survive. She felt the doctor kind of danced around the question, not wanting to give her a straight answer. So Carissa made a mistake. She looked it up on the internet. She was inundated with waves of potential negative effects of a birth that premature. She said to us, “What does it mean to trust God in a situation like this? We have been through so much, we have been praying and trying for so long to have a child, have spent so much money and gone through so much disappointment. Why would God have it turn out like this? What are we to think?”

She was asking honest questions. They had prayed for so long, as had we. God had finally answered those prayers by giving them a child, but now there was so much fear and uncertainty. Unfortunately she knows all too well that walking with God does not guarantee outcomes that we want. She knew about the tragic brief life and death of one of her brothers. She has a very good friend who had gone through almost exactly what she has been going through whose child did not survive. That’s one of those places as a dad and a pastor you never hope you find yourself. Carissa wasn’t rebelling against God, she wasn’t doubting him, but she was facing a frightening reality and asking, “If this goes bad how am I supposed to handle this and trust God”?

I wondered the same thing. I told her that trusting God at this point meant bringing our requests to him, asking him in faith to protect their little boy, to enable her to keep him in her womb until he was fully developed and ready to be born. It meant believing that God hears those prayers and cares about Michael and her and her baby. But it also means trusting if it doesn’t go as we ask, that somehow God will give us all the strength to deal with whatever comes and will bring good out of it.

Right at that time I was studying these verses, and I realized that the most important thing we can do during hard times like Michael and Carissa have been going through, is to latch onto and believe the message in these words. It is essential in such times that we see God as he actually is and put our hope in him. Modern medical science is astounding in some of the things it can do. But in a situation like this it is nearly helpless. They do not know why the thing that has been happening to Carissa occurs, and they stand nearly helpless in the face of it. They can do a few things, but in the end it is truly in the hands of God.

It is good, then, to know that God is able to do “immeasurably more than we can ask or think.” The words “immeasurably more” translate one Greek word. It is a fairly long word, *huperekperissou*. The root of it means an excess, overflowing, superabundance. But Paul tacked onto that root a preposition that made it mean “extraordinarily

superabundant.” Okay, I get the point. Paul apparently thought, “No, you really don’t yet.” So he tacked on still another preposition to make the word even stronger. He added the preposition *huper* (or *hyper* in English). So now it meant “hyper-extraordinarily superabundant.” In today’s slang it might be sort of like “super-uber overflowing.”

Notice also the word “all.” Paul says that whatever you ask of God, he can do more. In the original *Star Wars* movie when Luke Skywalker is trying to convince Han Solo to help him rescue Princess Leia, Han wants no part of it. Then Luke says, “She’s rich.” Han asks how rich, how much money she has. Luke answers, “More than you can imagine.” Han says, “I don’t know, I can imagine a lot.” We tend to be like that. Paul claims God can do more than I can even ask. I don’t know, I can ask a lot.

The word “all” is unequivocal. Yes, you may be able to ask a lot, but whatever you ask, God can do it and more. Paul did not say God can do some of what you ask. He did not say he can do a little of what you ask. He did not say he can do most of what you ask. It said he can do all that you can ask - and more. Jesus said the same thing when he said, “Nothing is impossible with God.”

Paul took it a step further when he said, “Not only can God do more than everything you can ask, he can do more than you can even dream of. So there is a progression in this passage. God can’t just do abundantly more than we can ask. He can do hyper, exceedingly super abundantly more than we can ask. And he can’t just do hyper, exceedingly, super abundantly more than some of what we ask. He can do hyper, exceedingly, superabundantly more than all we can ask. And he can’t just do hyper, exceedingly, superabundantly more than all we can ask. He can do hyper, exceedingly, superabundantly more than all we can even dream of.

There is an incident recorded in Judges that reminds me of this. Israel was in the land of Canaan, but despite God’s warnings, had compromised with their idolatrous neighbors and were worshiping false gods. So God allowed one of Israel’s enemies, the Midianites, to harass them and rain havoc on them for years, stealing some of their crops and animals and destroying the rest, leaving Israel in constant famine mode. Finally a massive army from Midian along with some allies invaded. Israel finally turned to their true God. They pleaded with Him for help, and he answered. He sent an angel to draft a guy to lead the charge against the invaders. He chose an unlikely character named Gideon. Gideon was not a professional soldier. As far as we know he had no military training whatsoever. By his own description he was from the smallest tribe and from a no name clan in that tribe, and he was the least of his family. He was a farmer, who was threshing wheat when an angel showed up and called him a “mighty warrior.” Gideon said the ancient Hebrew equivalent of, “Uh, are you talking to me? I think there must be some mistake here.”

God had to go to considerable lengths to convince Gideon that there was no mistake, that Gideon was the man he wanted. God told him to round up all the able bodied fighters he could find, so he sent out a call for volunteers. Amazingly 32,000 showed up to help. That's a lot of volunteers and it was probably more than he reasonably had hoped for. The problem was that group would be facing an army of 135,000 men. They would be outnumbered 4 to 1.

So God told him, "Hold on there, Gideon. You've got a problem." Gideon said, "You think? We're 100,000 men short!" God said, "Oh, no, that's not the problem. You've got too many." And Gideon said, "Yeah, that's what I just said. They've got too many for us." God replied, "No, I didn't say *they* have too many. I said *you* have too many." Gideon said, "I'm sorry, Lord, your signal is breaking up. That sounded like you said I have too many, but I know that can't be right." God assured him he heard right. Dismayed, Gideon told his army that if any of them were daunted by the odds they could bail and go home. It's not surprising that two thirds of them took him up on the offer. "Yeah, not liking those 4 to 1 odds. That puts the forecast at cloudy with a chance of annihilation. I'm outta here." Now Gideon had 10,000 men to face 135,000, outnumbered 13 to 1. If God had won the battle while facing 4 to 1 odds that would have been doing more than Gideon could have asked. But if he did it facing 13 to 1 odds, that would have been hyper abundantly more than he could ask.

But God didn't do that. He told Gideon, "We've had some budget cuts. Can't afford the size army you have. You're going to have to lose some of those guys." Gideon said, "Say what?" Once again the army was whittled down, this time to 300. That's not an army, that's a special forces unit. Yet God used that special forces unit to defeat an army 450 times its size. That's like each man being responsible for defeating 450 men from the invading army! Imagine being in that unit and thinking for you to do your part you were going to take on 450 enemy soldiers single handedly and defeat them all! The idea was absurd. But God made it happen. That was God doing what was hyper abundantly beyond all that Gideon could have ever asked or even imagined happening. I feel safe in asserting that Gideon would never have imagined taking on an army of 135,000 men with a force of only 300. Yet God was able to do it.

We get used to the concept of God. Yep, he's really powerful. In our minds we acknowledge the idea that it's true. But I want to remind you of how incredibly powerful God actually is. He is the Creator of all that exists. Have you thought recently about how massively powerful that makes him? Think about our sun for a moment. At its surface the temperature is 10,000 degrees Fahrenheit. At the core the temp is 27 million degrees. It is as large as a million earths. And the earth is huge. Sometimes we forget how big it is.

You can drive at 70 miles per hour for hours, and the distance you will have covered on a map of the world will hardly be noticeable. But now I want you to imagine that enormous body, the sun, being the size of one penny. At that scale, with the sun being the size of a penny, do you know how far away the nearest star would be? A hundred feet? A thousand yards? A mile? No, those guesses are not even close. The nearest star would be 350 miles away. Our galaxy on that scale would be 7.5 million miles across. And our galaxy is a tiny fraction of the universe. I read recently that if stars were grains of sand, the number of stars would be greater than the number of grains of sand on all the beaches of the world.

Psalm 147:4-5 says God, “determines the number of stars and calls them each by name. Great is our Lord and mighty in power; his understanding has no limit.” In Job 26:7 Job said of God, “He spreads out the northern skies over empty space; he suspends the earth over nothing.” Then in verse 14 he said, “These are but the outer fringes of his works; how faint the whisper we hear of him! Who then can understand the thunder of his power?”

God created, sustains and controls all of that vast universe, a universe so immense that our minds simply cannot grasp it. And that is a picture of the measure of the power and might of God. There comes a point at which all we can do is mentally acknowledge that it is too much for us not only to comprehend, but to sense as well. Our brains just hit a wall and we can’t get past it.

But that brings up a problem. We can believe in our heads that God has all of that massive power, but at some point in life we will struggle with the fact that we haven’t experienced it. In fact, we’ve asked God to do mighty things, using his unlimited power, and nothing has happened. How are we to believe in that vast power of God when it doesn’t seem to make a difference in our world? Why doesn’t he use that power to answer our prayers in dramatic, unmistakable ways? It’s fine to see his power back in Gideon’s day, or when Moses parted the Red Sea by the power of God, or when Jesus calmed a storm, and when he was raised from the dead. But that was way back then. We don’t see things like that happening in our lives, so does that mean that that power doesn’t really exist today? Is this something we give assent to, but don’t really believe in?

Let’s notice that this is not a promise that God will use his vast power to answer all our prayers. The point of these verses is to praise God. It is to extol an aspect of his character, in this case, his power. Yes, but Paul mentioned his power is more than all we can ask. Doesn’t that imply that we should see his power in answering our prayers? Certainly God’s power means that he is able to answer our prayers. But let’s remember a couple of important points from the context. First, what did Paul just pray? He prayed that we

would be strengthened inside by the Spirit, that we would be rooted in God's love so that we would be filled to all the fullness of God. Paul praised God because he has the power to answer that prayer fully, and to do far more than Paul could even imagine. We must notice where Paul said this power works. He said God can do beyond all we even imagine, "according to the power that is at work *in us*." The power is at work inside us, not so much in our circumstances.

Sometimes it is easy for us to forget what a miracle it is that we have a relationship with God. Go back to chapter 2 and remember that Paul said we were dead in our sin. There was nothing we could do to rescue ourselves from a hopeless situation. It took the power of God to raise Jesus from the grave, and it took God's phenomenal power to bring us alive spiritually. If his power were not at work, we would never have believed in Jesus. Why do you believe when so many others do not? It's not because you are smarter than others. It's not because you are more gullible or superstitious than others. It's not that you are more spiritually sensitive than others. It is for one reason and one reason alone. It is because God's enormous power worked a miracle and did the impossible, bringing you to life spiritually when you had been deader than a doornail.

Second, we should back up a little farther to verse 10. There Paul talked about the wisdom of God. What we learned there is that God is infinitely wiser than we are. He doesn't do things the way we would do them, but his way is always the wisest and best. It requires a modicum of faith to believe that God has the power to do infinitely beyond what we even dream of because we don't always see it in our circumstances. But we can see it in what he has done. We can see his power in creation. We see it in the cross. We even see it in the church. So what we must do is trust in his wisdom and continue to praise him as an Almighty God even when he doesn't exercise his power in ways we wish he would.

Yesterday we went to a birthday party for our two year old granddaughter, Cara. It was at the Corvette Diner down at Liberty Station. That is a loud restaurant with a lot going on. Cara had no clue what was going on. She never realized that the party was all in honor of her. She didn't get the significance of it at all. At one point we sang Happy Birthday to her, and she started crying hard. She flopped down on her back on the seat crying hysterically and kicking her legs. She accidentally kicked the balloon butterfly wings that Ella had been given and popped one of the balloons, so Ella also began crying. Just another great party with toddlers, with everybody crying. The problem is that Cara doesn't have the knowledge, the understanding and the wisdom to grasp what the whole thing was about. She has no way to understand it because she doesn't have the wisdom and knowledge that the adults at the party have.

So the question this brings up is, should the wiser, more knowledgeable adults do whatever Cara wants, or should they do what they know is for her best? Cara is certain they should do whatever she wants. So she gets upset when they won't let her eat the candle off the cake or suck ketchup out of the squeeze bottle the restaurant had on the table or dash out into the busy street outside the restaurant after the party.

There is far smaller gap between Cara's wisdom and mine, than there is between mine and God's. Just as Cara will have to trust that we love her and accept some of our decisions that to her seem unkind, so we will have to accept some of God's wise choices even though to us they seem inexplicable and unloving.

HE'S WORTHY OF GLORY

Verse 21 says of God, "To him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever." Paul's conclusion to his prayer is that we should give God glory.

We have seen before that glory has two aspects. One is an essential aspect. God has glory in his essence. He is glorious. But the other aspect of glory is attributive. We can attribute glory to someone or something. Our kids have told us about a French dip sandwich at a particular restaurant in San Clemente. Laurie and I went there last month and she ordered that sandwich. Not wanting to be boring and get the same thing she did I got something else. As she ate her sandwich, which is made with prime rib beef, she waxed eloquent about it. She kept saying, "This is so good! This is amazing." She was giving the sandwich glory. It has glory in and of itself. Laurie's praise of it didn't make it more delicious. She just acknowledged the intrinsic goodness of it. It is really good whether she praises it or not. It has essential glory. But she also can give it glory by praising it. God has intrinsic glory in himself. *He has it whether we give glory to him or not.* But we should acknowledge his glory. We should glorify him. There are two ways we humans give God glory. We can praise him just as Laurie praised that sandwich. But we can also live to honor him. In serving and obeying him, our lives make a statement that glorifies him, saying that he is worthy of all we can do for him.

Recently when our granddaughters were spending a day at our house, Ella found some old Christmas cards in the desk in her room at our house. She "worked" on one and then gave it to Laurie. She had no idea that it had to do with Christmas. She only saw it as a pretty card. In addition to a few scribbles on the card, Ella drew a little picture of a face. It was not worthy of being placed on a wall in the Louvre. It was not great art, but it was surprising at how well she drew. We'd never seen her do anything like it before. So do you know what Laurie did? She praised Ella for what she had created. She gave her

glory. She did so because we know when someone creates something really good, the natural and right response to that is to praise the person doing the creating.

Have you ever had the experience of encountering something that someone has made that is so good it amazes you? It could be a piece of art, or maybe some furniture, or even a meal. You react by saying, “You made this? Seriously? This is so good. You are really talented.” You praise not only the thing created and how good it is, but you praise the one who made it.

How good is the universe in which we live? How good is your own body? Okay, not in comparison to other human bodies, because my answer to that would be, “not that great. In fact, I have a few complaints.” But I mean the human body in general. It is astounding in its abilities. Take your eyes for example. Each eye is composed of more than 2 million working parts. More than a million nerve fibers connect your eye to your brain. Your eye can detect 500 different shades of gray and over 10 million colors (assuming you are not color blind). The human eye can see a candle flame at night from as far as 14 miles away! Our bodies are amazing. They actually have the ability to develop echolocation if we go blind! Several years ago while we were on vacation I cut my leg open on some coral and the wound got infected. It took a long time to heal. But the amazing thing about that is it did heal, and today there is no evidence that wound ever happened. I thought I would have a scar from it, and I did for a long time, but even that has disappeared. That is amazing. You have never seen any work of art or engineering as beautiful or as astounding as the human body. What is the natural response to that? Isn’t it to praise the one who created it?

Psalm 92:1 says, “It is good to praise the Lord and make music to your name, O Most High.” So it is good to give glory to God, to praise him. In what sense is it good? First, it is right. This is the way we should respond to something good. 1 Chronicles 16:29 says, “Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name.” God is glorious, and the right response to something glorious is to declare its glory.

Second, it is good because it orients us correctly. When we praise that which is truly good it humbles us and it exalts the true good. When we fail to praise the true good, we tend to get proud of ourselves and exalt things that are not good. Psalm 19:1 says, “The heavens declare the glory of God.” Pastor and writer, John Ortberg, says, David meant more than the heavens show God exists. He means they show the beauty, the wonder, the mystery, the power of it that reflect who God is. They shout to us that he is a glorious being.

There is a truth about all of us that we need to grasp. It is that we have a hunger for glory. We have a built-in need to give glory. It is original equipment in every human being. If

we don't give glory to God we will give glory to something that is not glorious. In the end, we will always seek to bring glory to ourselves. The root of the problem of the people of the city of Babel is revealed in Genesis 11:4 where they said, "Come, let us make a name for *ourselves*." Let's give glory to ourselves.

Unfortunately, when we do that it inevitably leads us to do that which is evil, it never works, and it ends up with us just looking silly. Here's an example. There is a new commanding officer on an army base who is in his office for the first time. He hears a knock on his door. Knowing it is a lesser person (since everyone on the base is less than him), he feels the desire to have the glory of a CO, to appear as important and as powerful as a CO should be. So he picks up the phone, tells the person at the door to enter, and as he comes in, says into the phone, "Yes, sir, General McConville (top general in the army), I'll get right on it. You can count on me, Sir." He hangs up the phone, then looks at the private who is standing at attention before his desk. He says, "At ease, Private. What can I do for you?" The private says, "Uhhh, I'm here to hook up your phone, Sir." When we try to glorify ourselves we will eventually fail, and we will probably make ourselves look silly in the process. Part of glorifying God is dying to the self-glorification project.

In Romans 1:18-32 Paul described the state of the fallen human race. He recites a litany of ills common among us. But he also tells us how the sad state of the human condition came to be. In verse 21 he wrote, "For although they knew God they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened." He goes on to say that they claimed to be wise but became fools. This is what happens when we do not give glory to God. Our thinking becomes futile and we become foolish and live in ways that are destructive and even evil. *At every moment of our lives if we are not giving glory to God, that process is occurring.* Our thinking is becoming futile and our hearts are being darkened.

It is also good for us in some other ways. As we give glory to God we are reminded of the truth about him. We remember that he is powerful and loving and good. We remember we can trust him and as a result we can live in peace. But glorifying God is also good for us in that it increases joy in our lives. C. S. Lewis makes the point that our enjoyment of lovely things actually requires that we praise them. We don't experience the true joy of them until we praise them. As exhibit A, I give you... Facebook. I do not have a Facebook page, but Laurie does. She has shown me pictures she sees on Facebook that have been posted by friends from locations all over the world. Why do people do that? Why do they take time from a vacation trip to post pictures of things they have seen that they love? That is actually a form of praise, and their enjoyment of those places is actually increased by the act of praising. We know that because when you go to an

amazing restaurant for the first time and you take some bites of food that are out of this world, what is your response? “This food is to die for!” In the act of praising it you complete your enjoyment of it.

So it is in the act of giving glory to God for who he is, for the beauty of his creation, for the wonders of his grace that he gives to us, that we actually increase and complete our joy in them.

Praising God is not only the right thing to do, it is the healthiest thing we can ever do!

CONCLUSION

This passage reminds us that our God is hyper-super-overflowing powerful, beyond anything we can even imagine. There is no limit to his power. This means there is no limit to the peace that we can have in every situation. We may not see him wield his power in a way that makes life easier or more comfortable for us, but that’s because his power is directed by his wisdom. We must never forget that his wisdom is as infinitely greater than ours as his power is infinitely greater than ours. So we must always trust him and we can always have peace.

What enables us to experience that trust and peace is giving glory to God as Paul did in this passage. In his book, *In A Pit, With A Lion, On A Snowy Day*, Mark Batterson wrote, “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.”

Which kind of person do you want to be? Complainers will always have a negative impact on others. They will make them feel discouraged, dissatisfied or annoyed. The complainers themselves will not experience joy. They will find the cloud to every silver lining, and will drain the goodness and enthusiasm right out of life. They simply will not be happy souls. Worshipers, on the other hand, will find joy even in the toughest of times. They will have hope and strength and courage. And they will honor God, just as Job did when in his darkest days he said, “The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away. May the name of the Lord be praised.”

The right thing to do, the healthiest, most life-giving thing we can do, is give glory to God at all times. Let’s be worshipers, not complainers.