

HAPPY NEW YEAR: "LOOKING AHEAD BY LOOKING BACK" (Joshua 23:14)

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INTRODUCTION

2020 - what an unbelievable year! The most generous thing I have heard about this year finally coming to an end has been: "a year like no other." Certain words and phrases sprung into everyday usage and, in fact, got quite the workout: pandemic, coronavirus, lockdown, hybrid learning, distance learning, herd immunity, asymptomatic, social distancing, flatten the curve, blurs day, doom scrolling, COVID fatigue, contact tracing, hot spot, pulse oximeter, curbside service, bubbles, ZOOM, virtual happy hour. Sports, when they could finally play, were done in isolation, with few or no fans. The Democratic convention was largely conducted virtually. Other words and phrases and even acronyms have been given new life as their meanings recall some pretty dark, even scary, images: ICU, PPE, intubation, ventilator, masks, frontline workers, essential workers, quarantine, super-spreader event. And that's just how 2020 impacted us in the area of public health. And please understand I'm absolutely not weighing in on any of this in terms of how valid or how appropriate. I'm simply pointing out words and phrases that, what seemed like all of a sudden, I was reading all the time.

Same thing with social justice: Following the death of George Floyd in May, more words and phrases crashed our consciousness: systemic, structural and environmental racism, defund the police, antifa, Black Lives Matter, antebellum, gentrification. I watched riots I haven't seen since the late '60s, and I watched all those things this year.

Then of course we had elections, and more wonderful words and phrases became everyday hearing and reading: red states, blue states, alt-right, mail-in ballots, vote observers, fraud, recounts, lawsuits, democratic institutions, martial law, conspiracy theories. Like all the other events of the year, these weren't new words, but I was hearing them and reading about them in brand new, sometimes disturbing, contexts. And maybe that's the best way to describe 2020: A year with a whole lot of disturbing contexts.

Well, now we're on the cusp on a new year, which seems to be one highly anticipated, as most people are very ready to move on from 2020, sort of like being excited that a noisy, unruly neighbor is finally moving.

But one thing hasn't changed: God. God is on the throne of the universe, just like he's always been. But sometimes in the midst of the muck and mire that seemed to define so much of 2020, it's easy to let ourselves overlook God's sovereignty as we leave navigating all this "fun" to ourselves. Well, back in OT times, the man who had led the Israelites following the death of Moses, a guy named Joshua, recognized some of those same possibilities for his nation. So, as he was coming to the end of his life, he shared some thoughts, including this wonderful verse that we are going to look at today. But first, **let's look to the Lord in a word of prayer.**

TEXT AND ANALYSIS

"You know with all your heart and soul that not one of all the good promises the Lord

your God gave you has failed. Every promise has been fulfilled; not one has failed" - Joshua 23:14b.

Now in the context of this moment, Joshua is nearing the end of his life; in fact, in the first part of this verse, he acknowledges that: ***"Now I am about to go the way of all the earth"- Joshua 23:14a.*** And while the moment of counsel to the nation is not being shared in the calendar sense of "old year/new year," there certainly is a sense that there is change in the air as well as a sense of looking back.

So, when Joshua and the nation of Israel look back from this moment in time, what do they see? Better said, what did they see as God worked out His promises? Some great things:

- 1) Finally crossing the Jordan River into Canaan, at long last ending their 40 years of wilderness wandering.
- 2) A conquest of a great portion of the Promised Land - starting with their victory at the city of Jericho.
- 3) The renewal of their covenant as a people belonging to the Lord.
- 4) The miracle of the sun standing still during battle against their enemies.
- 5) Division of the land between the tribes.
- 6) The overall joy of knowing that ***[s]urely the Lord was fighting for Israel! - Joshua 10:14-b.***

They also experienced sometimes of great heartache and disappointment when they separated themselves from God's promises:

- 1) The sin of Achan following the battle of Jericho.
- 2) Their defeat at the city of Ai.
- 3) Their deception at the hand of the Gibeonites.

But overall, it had been a time of great blessing, but great blessing for only one reason; as it tells us at the end of the book of Joshua: ***Israel served the Lord throughout the lifetime of Joshua and of the elders who outlived him and who had experienced everything the Lord had done for Israel - Joshua 24:31.*** Translation: When people remembered God's promises, and all that God had done in validating those promises, it kept them in relationship with God, which made continuing to serve the Lord the natural result of an ongoing life together. That, in turn, allowed them to move forward with confidence because they had a "track record" in which to rejoice: Through experiencing "everything the Lord had done for Israel," and holding those things in their hearts and minds, they could know that, as surely as He had been with them in the past, He would continue to be with them in the future. What an amazing way to live, being able to experience in each day the confidence that comes from a relationship in which "we know who holds the future." No wonder 20th century American preacher and gospel lyricist Ira Stanphill was inspired to write in 1950:

*Many things about tomorrow I don't seem to understand
But I know who holds tomorrow and I know who holds my hand.*

Do you hear what he is saying? When it comes to God, there are no unknowns. The blessings come in "laying in the hammock" with the God holding the ends who does know

everything: every coming event, every direction, every concern, every decision, every joy, every sorrow - everything.

APPLICATION

So, what does it mean to live by watching God's promises in action? How do we do that? What is required to live like that? Several things:

First, learn God's promises. Study them; learn everything you can about them. It's hard to appreciate God in action if you haven't learned the promises behind God's actions. In fact, it's God's word and God's promises that define God's actions, so it is incredibly, critically important to know what God says about Himself:

- 1) In the OT: ***As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from My mouth: It will not return to Me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it" - God speaking, Isaiah 55:10-11.*** You want to know God's purposes? Study the promises spoken in God's word.
- 2) In the OT: ***"Let us know, let us pursue the knowledge of the Lord - Hosea 6:3a (NKJV).*** And why should we pursue "the knowledge of the Lord?"
- 3) In the NT: ***"For no word from God will ever fail" - The angel Gabriel, speaking to Mary, Luke 1:37.*** For human beings, an impossible bar. For God, no promises fail because God Himself never fails. Knowing His promises lets us know and experience His unfailing nature as well.

In applying God's promises to the past, we see how God has carried out His promises, how He has fulfilled His word and, in so doing, we see His word is always true, always faithful, always trustworthy. And it is that confidence that we can carry with us into the future - the next hour, the next day, the next week, the New Year.

Second, study God's actions; literally watch Him work. Look for Him; see where He is operating. The Bible, from one end to the other, is literally the telling of God at work - and we are invited to watch Him do what He does through the pages of Scripture. And, because God never changes (Malachi 3:1a), how God works is the same today the same as it was yesterday. And, as Christians, we have the best seats in the house with which we can study how God works. A little example from the world of sports: You know, one of the most consistent comments I hear in reading about people involved in professional sports is when I read about a player going to a team that already has an acknowledged superstar on their roster. One detail always seems to be mentioned: They come to understand why so-and-so is a superstar because they see how that person works at their craft, day in and day out. Stuff that wasn't visible from outside the team becomes very visible for those who are members of the team. They get to see that work ethic all the time. They find out that a particular superstar is a superstar because he or she is the first one to arrive for practice, and the last one to leave practice. They never quit learning or trying to improve. And what the opponents and the public get to see is the fruit of that diligence: superstar! And what's often behind that combination of fundamental talent mixed with extraordinary work

habits? Passion - for their team and for their sport.

Well, as Christians we belong to the greatest "superstar" of all time. We're not outsiders; we're members of His team. We got the inside look. We of all people have the inside track on not only watching God work but learning from and understanding how He works. And nobody has a greater passion for His "team" than God; in fact, He wants us to understand how and why He does what He does; He even challenges us to experience Him in His activity:

- 1) From the OT: ***Taste and see that the Lord is good - David, Psalm 34:8a.*** In other words, don't just look in passing, experience Me. In fact, you can't know Me without experiencing Me - so come watch Me! See for yourself whether I'm everything I say I am.
- 2) And from somebody who had that experience, also from the OT: ***"My ears had heard of You but now my eyes have seen You" - Job speaking, Job 42:5.*** Translation: I have seen You at work. No more hearsay; I have experienced You. In other words: Relationship.
- 3) That's why Paul was able to celebrate in the NT: ***I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that He is able - Paul, II Timothy 1:12b.***

And even as we are encouraged to study God's word for His promises, and to watch God as He fulfills His promises, we are also told that the life of greatest blessing is the life that pursues God, desiring nothing more than to live pleasing to Him by doing everything possible to get to know Him:

- 1) ***"[P]lease show me now Your ways, that I may know You" - Moses, Exodus 33:13a (ESV).***
- 2) ***"Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, let not the mighty man glory in his might, nor let the rich man glory in his riches; but let him who glories glory in this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the Lord" - God speaking, Jeremiah 9:23-24a (NKJV).*** Makes me want to ask, starting with me: Is the greatest joy in my life knowing the Lord? Is my joy in knowing the Lord so overwhelming that everything else in my life is fighting for second place, because nothing else is even close? Does the world in seeing me see a life overwhelmed by the joy of knowing the Lord? Is knowing the Lord the greatest desire I have for my life?
- 3) ***"You will seek Me and find Me when you seek Me with all your heart" - God speaking, Jeremiah 29:13.***

So, here's the deal: The more we get to know God's word, the more we get to know how God works. And the better we get to know how God works, the more we will see Him at work. We will better recognize His actions and better understand His intentions. And knowing Him better and watching Him clearer will draw us closer, in a process that will continue to grow us and nurture us, just as kids find great joy in coming alongside "Dad" to be with him no matter what he is doing. It exercises the relationship, making it grow stronger and surer, and the love for each other grow more and more sweet.

CONCLUSION

So why is all this so important? Well, and this is just me speaking, I have seldom felt as much uneasiness inside as I do now as I consider the future of our country.

To be honest, I hear some scary voices suggesting some rather frightening things that leave me wondering: How are people going to respond to a (presumed) new administration? How are people going to deal with an ongoing pandemic? How are the social justice issues that played out, in many cases, so violently this past spring and summer going to show themselves this coming year? How are people going to act out their anger over election issues and economic issues? How emboldened are people going to feel about their perceived rights being overlooked or ignored or downright trampled? A bomb goes off in downtown Nashville on Christmas morning. Is that a hint of what our national future holds? I don't know.

But there is also a more personal side to all this as well, which unfortunately shows how easy it is to focus on, to be distracted by, the wrong thing. And who is the culprit of this particular wrong? Me.

Let me explain, I am not a fan of winter, mostly because of the headaches it causes on the road. So, when we got clear of the snow we got back in October and then had about two and a half months of almost no weather at all - just dry roads and nice temps - I was thrilled. That all changed when, so close to going home for Christmas, I hear that there's a winter storm on the way, even a blizzard. And so quickly, my thoughts went to poor little pitiful me, and how the driving just got tougher, and couldn't we make it just a couple more weeks, and so on and so on. Hey there, Dan; would you like a little cheese to go with that whine?

But then God arrived in my stumbling soul, and He quickly told me that, yes, I can whine about the coming winter storm or blizzard or whatever, or I can hit my knees in praise and thanksgiving that He has provided, for over two years now, amazingly good roads for me to drive on. I got so focused on my difficult little "now" that I overlooked over two years of "wow" that God has so graciously blessed me with. And flooding in came memories of all His promises, delivered without fail, to be watching over me, to keeping me safe no matter the weather so that I could continue in a ministry I still can't believe He has granted me. Folks, I was a meathead!

It reminded me (again) of how easy it is to let the "now" of very temporary, earthly circumstances be allowed to become a bigger deal than the mighty promises of Almighty God. Don't let that happen. This world is not our home; we very genuinely are just passing through. Yes, our mission, our ministry, is here - but our home, our future is heaven. What does this coming year hold? I don't have the first clue, whether for better or worse. But I do know my God: His powers never fade, His promises never break, His love never ends.

We all have a choice as we prepare to head into 2021: Where are we going to place our focus - on the now, on this world, or on the eternity we have waiting for us in heaven, sustained by the God who knows everything about every tomorrow we will ever face?

Remember the words of the apostle Paul as he wrote his second letter to the Corinthian Christians: *[W]e know that the One who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you to Himself. ...Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal - Paul, II Corinthians 4:14, 16-18.*

That is what I pray for you all in the coming year - as Peter said, to *grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ - II Peter 3:18.*

Why is that my prayer? So that nothing in this world, no matter how difficult the moment, will ever be allowed to distract any of us from the incredible promises that we have been given, that will not only sustain us in this life, but be alongside us for all of eternity. And eternity with God is the greatest promise of all! Whenever that happens, every Christian who has ever lived, every single person who has had their life surrendered to Jesus Christ, will have that incredible amazing future to look forward to. We can know that - because God promised! Let's pray!